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WORDSWORTH

ON A PORTRAIT OF WORDSWORTH BY R. B. HAYDON

Wordsworth upon Helvellyn! Let the cloud
Ebb audibly along the mountain-wind
Then break against the rock, and show behind
The lowland valleys floating up to crowd
The sense with beauty. He with forehead bowed
And humble-lidded eyes, as one inclined
Before the sovran thought of his own mind,
And very meek with inspirations proud,
Takes here his rightful place as poet-priest
By the high altar, singing prayer and prayer
To the higher Heavens. A noble vision free
Our Haydon's hand has flung out from the mist!
No portrait this, with Academic air!
This is the poet and his poetry.

—*Elizabeth Barrett Browning.*

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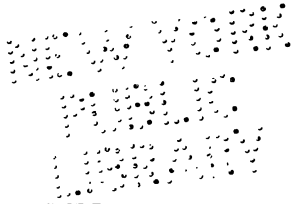
From the famous portrait by Haydon
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

HOW TO KNOW HIM

By
C. T. WINCHESTER, A. M., L. H. D.
Author of
Five Short Courses of Reading English Literature
Some Principles in Literary Criticism
The Life of John Wesley, etc.

With Portrait



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To My Colleague

WILLIAM NORTH RICE

Life-Long Student and Reverent
Lover of Nature

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WORDSWORTH

WORDSWORTH

CHAPTER I

THE EARLY YEARS

"The poet, to whose mighty heart
Heaven doth a quicker pulse impart,
Subdues that energy to scan
Not his own course, but that of man.
Though he move mountains, though his day
Be passed on the proud heights of sway,
Though he hath loosed a thousand chains,
Though he hath borne immortal pains,
Action and suffering though he know—
He hath not lived, if he lives so."

THESE lines from a thoughtful and finished poem by Matthew Arnold, introduce by contrast an extended and very beautiful statement of what the ideal poet's life should be; a life full of high and serene contemplation, of deep and placid sympathies with nature and with man, but lived in calm isolation, apart from the loud noises of the

world. The scenery of the poem is all drawn from the Lake Country familiar to all lovers of English poetry as the home of William Wordsworth; and it seems impossible to doubt that his picture of the ideal poet's life was suggested to Arnold by thought of the great man whose long career was then drawing toward its tranquil close.

Certainly no life so eminent as that of Wordsworth was ever more nobly simple, more lacking in picturesque or romantic details. After a comparatively brief period of enthusiasm and independence, his remaining story presents hardly any incidents more noteworthy than the removal from one end of a mountain lake to the other. He had few intimate friends, and cared little for chance acquaintance. To his plain country neighbors he seemed a respected, rather reserved stamp-collector who was said to write verses. For the last twenty years of his life he was the most venerable figure in England, recognized as the first poet of his generation, but living apart in thoughtful seclusion among the hills of the Lake Country, with the light of his fame like a pure cold halo about him.

Evidently the biographer must concern himself chiefly with the inner life of Wordsworth, the de-

velopment of his genius, the character of the man as seen in his poetry. Even here he has been largely anticipated by the poet himself. For Wordsworth left to be published after his death one of the most remarkable autobiographical poems in the language, in which he tells the story of

> . . . the discipline
> And consummation of a poet's mind

up to about his thirtieth year, when his calling as poet was assured. *The Prelude* was written when his powers were at their height, and he was not far away from the period he describes; and though he kept it by him unpublished for half a life-time, he seems to have been wise enough not to disturb its early energy by much revision in his later and duller years. Indeed, *The Prelude,* if accompanied by a judicious body of notes, would probably be pronounced by most genuine Wordsworthians the best, in fact the only adequate, record of his career. But we must admit that Wordsworth, when in his moods of leisurely reflection, did not always show a gift of energetic brevity; and it is to be feared that the average reader will hardly find the passages of very noble poetry scattered through *The Prelude* quite

sufficient to enliven some eight thousand lines of personal reminiscence and interpretation.

But let no one who has not yet learned to know Wordsworth conclude that either the life or the work of this man is of little interest. Precisely the contrary is true. We may admit that there seems at first sight to be little in his career to awaken curiosity, little in his personality to invite intimate acquaintance; yet the fact remains that no English poet of the early nineteenth century holds a surer place in the deepest emotions of his readers, is more widely read or genuinely beloved to-day, than William Wordsworth. Further knowledge of the man shows that the monotony and apparent dulness of his life were due to the depth and poise of his nature, rather than to any lack of more impassioned feeling. And if there are barren tracts in his poetry, enough remains that is fertile in the highest truth. The thoughtful student will tell you that no other poet has taught him so much; and that less serious person, the general reader, who is after all the best friend and the final judge of every real poet, constantly finds some high thought or quiet picture from the verse of Wordsworth visiting his memory, and whenever he walks abroad looks

upon the world, half unconsciously, through Wordsworth's eyes. The English Lake Country is thronged every summer by admiring tourists who visit the tiny Dove Cottage as if it were a shrine, bow in the old Grasmere church or stand by the poet's grave in the quiet churchyard outside, or pace up and down the walks he used to know, with a feeling that the consecration of his verse is somehow still on the scene, that the valley is a sanctuary and the solemn mountains that stand about it heights of revelation. It must be the object of the pages that follow here to inquire what qualities of this man, as seen in his poetry or his life, have won for him such high regard.

"The child is father of the man," said Wordsworth. His own life is proof of this statement. He was born April 7, 1770, in Cockermouth, in Cumberland, near the sea that washes the northwestern corner of England. His father, John Wordsworth, was an attorney, legal agent for a gentleman of the county, Sir John Lowther, afterward Lord Lonsdale. There were five children, of whom William was the second; an elder brother, Richard, of whom we hear little; the sister, Dorothy, whose life was to be so closely linked with that of the poet; and

two brothers still younger, John, the sea captain, and Christopher, the scholar of the family, who was to be Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. The mother, who seems never to have been of robust health, died when William was but eight years of age. He retained but slight recollection of her; but the picture he shaped from those recollections in the Fifth Book of *The Prelude* gives us the impression of a woman of quiet strength and serenity of temper. It was a tradition, recorded by Wordsworth himself near the close of his life, that he was the only one of her children about whose future she felt anxious; he, she said, "would be remarkable for good or evil. The cause of this was that I was of a stiff, moody, and violent temper." In proof of which he remembers once striking his whip through an old family portrait, and, on another occasion, indignant at some fancied slight, going up into the attic intent on committing suicide with some foils he knew to be there, though thinking better of it before he could screw his courage to the sticking point. In which childish recollections we can perhaps trace something of that stubborn self-confidence in the face of criticism or opposition displayed in later years by William

Wordsworth the poet. Mrs. Wordsworth spent much time, in the latest years of her life, at her father's house in Penrith. William and his sister Dorothy were usually with her in these periods; and it was while in school at Penrith that William first met the little girl, Mary Hutchinson, his cousin and two years his junior, who some twenty years later was to be his wife.

The year after his mother's death, the boy was sent away to school, in the village of Hawkshead. He was nine years of age when he entered the Hawkshead School; he was fourteen when he left it. Those five years were, he says, truly enough, the "fair seed time of my soul." Hawkshead is a little market town in the English Lake District that has fortunately escaped most modern improvements, and can boast the unspoiled quaintness of the last century. The long and low old church still hangs on the brow of the hill: the odd market square, sunny and quiet in summer afternoons, the narrow wriggling streets, the old houses with their picturesque archways and gables—they are all little changed since Wordsworth was there. You may still see the cottage where he lived with Dame Ty-

son, and climb to the little chamber under the roof where he

> . . . heard the wind
> Roar, and the rain beat hard; where I so oft
> Have lain awake on summer nights to watch
> The moon in splendor couched among the leaves
> Of a tall ash that near our cottage stood:
> Have watched her with fixed eyes, while to and fro
> In the dark summit of the waving tree
> She rocked with every impulse of the breeze.

How much the boy Wordsworth learned in the schoolhouse under the hill we need not inquire; but in those years he certainly did learn a better lore than was taught there. For just below the village sleeps the little lake of Esthwaite, meadows sloping to its marge, with here and there a fringe of birch or alder; eastward a mile's scramble to the top of a long level hill and you look down on the calm expanse of Windermere; westward the quiet valley is shut in by high and heath-clad fells over which Coniston Old Man and Wetherlam thrust their massy shoulders; northward a little way on the winding road to Ambleside will bring you where you may see the twin peaks of Langdale keeping solemn watch over their secluded vale. Green valley,

quiet lake, lonely wind-swept fell, solemn, mist-wreathed mountain—these were the young William Wordsworth's best teachers.

One of his later critics thinks "there was nothing Wordsworthian about the boy Wordsworth." But surely this is a strange statement. Doubtless he was a hardy lad and felt to the full that healthy exhilaration every boy ought to know at being turned loose to his own devices out-of-doors,

> . . . That giddy bliss
> Which like a tempest works along the blood
> And is forgotten.

But he had also in these early years a most remarkable susceptibility to the more imaginative and spiritual influences of nature. To him more frequently than to most lads came strange moments of vision when the familiar outward scene seemed instinct with solemn life, and sent into the heart of the boy a never-to-be-forgotten thrill of awe and wonder that became one of the spiritual forces of his life. Some of the best of all Wordsworth's nature poetry is to be found in those passages of *The Prelude* that record these moments. They usually came to him when he was alone, rowing on the lake, or running along the moonlit fells to set his

snares; or when he burst into a thickly shaded forest nook and felt a sudden sense of guilt at ravaging the peace that dwelt there; or when, skating at night, he swept away from the uproar of his companions into some silent bay, and stopping short upon his heels—

> Yet still the solitary cliffs
> Wheeled by me—even as if the earth had rolled
> With visible motion her diurnal round!
> Behind me did they stretch in solemn train
> Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watched
> Till all was tranquil as a dreamless sleep.

One of these passages may be quoted here at length:

> One summer evening (led by her) I found
> A little boat tied to a willow tree
> Within a rocky cave, its usual home.
> Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in
> Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth
> And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
> Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;
> Leaving behind her still, on either side,
> Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
> Until they melted all into one track
> Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,
> Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point
> With an unswerving line, I fixed my view
> Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,
> The horizon's utmost boundary; far above
> Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.

She was an elfin pinnace; lustily
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan;
When, from behind that craggy steep till then
The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the covert of the willow tree;
There in her mooring-place I left my bark,—
And through the meadows homeward went, in grave
And serious mood; but after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

Prelude I, 355-393.

Doubtless in such passages the poet interprets and perhaps somewhat exaggerates the imaginative significance of those early experiences as seen through

the perspective of memory; but he does not invent them. It is certain that before he was well into his teens this boy had begun to feel in the presence of the familiar forms of hill and valley, lake and sky, moments of emotion so vivid and so strange as to survive in his recollection when almost all the other incidents of those years had been forgotten. To gain some sense of companionship with the solemn forms of nature, to feel thus early, however vaguely, something of the spiritual power and mystery of the world,—this was to get an education such as Master Woodford could not give in the schoolhouse under the hill.

> Ye Presences of Nature in the sky
> And on the earth! Ye Visions of the hills!
> And Souls of lonely places! can I think
> A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed
> Such ministry, when ye through many a year
> Haunting me thus among my boyish sports,
> On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills,
> Impressed upon all forms the characters
> Of danger or desire; and thus did make
> The surface of the universal earth
> With triumph and delight, with hope and fear,
> Work like a sea?
>
> *Prelude* I, 464-475.

Wordsworth was singularly fortunate in the re-

gion where those formative years were passed. Had his boyhood been spent in the Lincolnshire fen country or in the tame and cultivated landscape of some of the southern counties, he might never have been a poet; certainly he would have been a very different poet. But the scenery of the Lake District was exactly fitted to inspire that tone of feeling which characterizes all his work. Austere but not rugged, its mountains lofty enough to be solemn but not lofty enough to be awful, its dales and valleys secluded and peaceful but not lonely,—the whole region invites to serene but lofty thought. It seems the outward picture of Wordsworth's mind. Nearly all his life was passed there, and in the few years of his absence these were the scenes that filled his memory and inspired his best verse. It is hardly too much to say that no one can fully appreciate Wordsworth's poetry who has not dwelt for a time in the Lake Country and felt its high and quiet charm.

One other thing Wordsworth learned in those early years: he learned to know a man when he saw him. In that remote and somewhat sparsely peopled district the English distinctions of rank were practically unknown. As he says,

> It was my fortune scarcely to have seen
> Through the whole tenor of my school-day time
> The face of one who, whether boy or man,
> Was vested with attention or respect
> Through claims of wealth or blood.

Most of the dalesmen were of the class they call in the north country "statesmen"—that is, small peasant proprietors who own the land they till. They cropped the green valleys, pastured their sheep on the fells, and in their stone-built cottages the spinning-wheel kept up its purring by the fireside all the winter long. Society was very much like that of some of our New England back-country towns a century ago. Such a condition of life fosters not only thrift and independence, but those neighborly sympathies which are impossible without a certain isolation—it is hard to feel neighborly sympathy toward the party living in the next flat. Now this type of character, with its frugal independence, its freedom from all the disguises of convention, its homely fireside charities, Wordsworth learned, even while a boy, to take as his ideal. It was subtly associated in his imagination with the strength of the hills and the calm of the sky. Of such men, he thought, should be made the citizenship of a free

state. In the simple speech of such men should be found the stuff of the truest poetry. All his life long he was rather too prone to measure both virtue and poetry by their conformity to this rustic ideal. There was some truth in Mary Lamb's remark that, by Wordsworth's system, it seemed doubtful whether the dwellers in towns had any souls to be saved.

In October, 1787, Wordsworth left Hawkshead to enter St. John's College, Cambridge. He was in his eighteenth year. He kept terms regularly until January, 1791, when he was given his degree. But the university did little for him. In the jovial society of his college he could hardly feel at home. Never exactly a genial man, he carried up to Cambridge a certain hard independence touched with a rusticity of manner, not likely to recommend him to the exuberant fellowship of student life. He says, indeed, that he

> Slipped into the ordinary works
> Of careless youth,

rowed on the Cam, galloped about the country in "blind zeal of senseless horsemanship"; and he re-

cords with odd solemnity of confession that once, seated with some festive companions in the room that Milton had occupied,

> I poured out
> Libations to thy memory; drank, till pride
> And gratitude grew dizzy in a brain
> Never excited by the fumes of wine
> Before that hour or since.

But he formed no intimate personal friendships, and he always referred to the idleness of his university life in terms of indifference or half-apology. Nor did he gain much from professors and lecturers. The intellectual life of Cambridge at the close of the eighteenth century was doubtless very torpid; but even if it had been more active, it is doubtful if Wordsworth would have been much touched by it. He had not the temper of the scholar and never craved the still air of delightful studies. He felt, it is true, the august literary associations of the place. He read the Cambridge poets, Chaucer, Milton and, above all, Spenser; but he read only what he wished. The formal requirements of the university, for study or for worship, were irksome to him. He draws, in *The Prelude,* a curious picture of an ideal university, where, surrounded by

imposing forms of nature, the generous enthusiasm of unriper years should not be wasted in frivolities, but insensibly drawn to the love of knowledge for its own sake.

At the end of his first Cambridge year Wordsworth hurried away from the university to spend his long vacation in Hawkshead. He was housed again in Dame Tyson's cottage, and spent the whole summer in rambling over the old walks, and renewing his acquaintance with old friends. The experiences of the summer renewed and deepened the influence of nature upon his growing imagination. One hour there was, especially memorable. As he was returning at sunrise from a rustic merry-making that had lasted all night long, the solemn overpowering beauty of the world at morning struck into his soul in some mysterious way the conviction that he was called to be a poet.

> My heart was full! I made no vows, but vows
> Were there made for me; bond unknown to me
> Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,
> A dedicated spirit.

In later years, he was wont to look back, perhaps with rather too lofty complacency, upon such hours of special dedication. It was in this summer, also,

that he took a deeper interest than ever before in the simple cottagers of the Hawkshead region. Perhaps the idle and thoughtless gaiety of his Cambridge associates may have forced his thought upon the essential dignity and pathos that reside in the humblest lives. In the record of the year we find the beginnings of that sympathy which was later to give us such poems as *Michael* and *The Brothers*.

His third summer vacation may be regarded as opening a new chapter in Wordsworth's spiritual development. In company with a college friend, Robert Jones, he spent the summer of 1790 in a long walking tour through France and Switzerland. That was a time big with the fate of Europe. The first year of the French Revolution was closing with good hopes for an ordered liberty. The National Assembly was busy framing the new Constitution, and had forced from their King his promise to take oath to support it. Wordsworth and his friend arrived in Calais on that very fourteenth of July when all France was celebrating the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, and when the King was taking his solemn oath of allegiance to the Constitution. As they went on through France they found every hamlet and village

Gaudy with the reliques of that festival.

Liberty dances, the planting of liberty trees, the ringing of bells, all bespoke the joy of a people in a new-found, untried liberty. The whole country wore a face of joy. Wordsworth says, indeed, that he viewed all this festivity, as a sympathetic observer, but "with no intimate concern"; he was interested more in the sublime mountain scenery of Switzerland which he was seeing for the first time. Yet the spectacle of a whole people suddenly awakening to the joy of freedom could not leave him indifferent; and the account of his journey in the *Descriptive Sketches*—written two years afterward —closes with an eloquent tribute to that

> Great and glorious birth,
> As if a new heaven were hailing a new earth.

But it was in the following year, 1791-92, that Wordsworth's enthusiasm for the cause of liberty in France rose into flame. After leaving Cambridge in January, 1791, he spent several months in London. All England was watching the course of events across the channel. Wordsworth's sympathy with the French movement was steadily growing.

He was coming to feel as most young Englishmen felt. "How much is this the greatest event of modern times, and how much the best," Fox had said, when he heard of the fall of the Bastille; and almost all liberal Englishmen agreed with him. One great voice alone broke the chorus of hope and praise. Edmund Burke, from the first, refused to see in the Revolution promise of any liberty that could be married with law. Wordsworth, during his stay in London, heard Burke thundering in Parliament; admired, wondered, but was unconvinced. In November he went over to France, ostensibly to perfect himself in the language, but really, it is probable, to see and hear for himself the great drama enacting there. He visited Paris, listened to the debates in the Assembly, looked in at the Jacobin Club, stood on the site of the ruined Bastille, and carried away a bit of stone from it as a relic. Yet he regarded the turmoil of the revolutionary capital mostly as a curious spectator, and afterward admitted that he perhaps had affected more enthusiasm than he felt. But he went on from Paris to Orleans and thence to Blois, where he passed the winter; and here he first came to understand the Revolution. He formed

the acquaintance in Blois of a number of young French officers who represented the nobler and more thoughtful side of the revolutionary movement. With one of them especially, General Beaupuis, a philosopher and poet as well as soldier, he held many long and intimate conversations, and learned from him the real cause of the Revolution. One incident in their companionship may best be told in Wordsworth's own words.

> . . . We chanced
> One day to meet a hunger-bitten girl,
> Who crept along fitting her languid gait
> Unto a heifer's motion, by a cord
> Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane
> Its sustenance, while the girl with pallid hands
> Was busy knitting in a heartless mood
> Of solitude, and at the sight my friend
> In agitation said, "'Tis against *that*
> That we are fighting," I with him believed
> That a benignant spirit was abroad
> Which might not be withstood, that poverty
> Abject as this would in a little time
> Be found no more, that we should see the earth
> Unthwarted in her wish to recompense
> The meek, the lowly, patient child of toil,
> All institutes for ever blotted out
> That legalised exclusion, empty pomp
> Abolished, sensual state and cruel power,
> Whether by edict of the one or few;

> And finally, as sum and crown of all,
> Should see the people having a strong hand
> In framing their own laws; whence better days
> To all mankind.
>
> *Prelude* IX, 510–532.

Here, then, was the real cause of the Revolution. Accustomed as he had been from boyhood to the sturdy, independent manhood of the Cumberland dalesmen, Wordsworth now saw with astonished indignation a peasantry that had been starved and slaved for centuries. It was this great, suffering people that were now awaking, and, with a voice that shook all Europe, claiming their place among mankind. This was the claim that stirred Wordsworth's deepest sympathies. He had not been deeply moved by general declamations on liberty and the rights of men, even when he had given assent to such large principles; but the picture of this starving girl and the thousands like her all over France, got hold upon his imagination. He saw in the Revolution the promise of a time when this sodden and nerveless people should wrest from their rulers the rights and privileges of liberty. The haste and violence of the early months of the Revolution, the strife of the factions in Paris, seemed only the troubled dawn of a brighter day. For the first

time this stern and isolated temper was aglow with an intense benevolence. It was the first awakening within him of a great, brooding, unselfish enthusiasm. Hitherto only Nature could stir in him any living emotion: now he felt the deeper response of a common humanity. To his dying day, he was wont to look back with a certain fond regret for those early years when for once he had been carried out of himself by a great wave of sympathy or confidence for mankind.

O pleasant exercise of hope and joy!
For mighty were the auxiliars which then stood
Upon our side, us who were strong in love!
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven! O times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights
When most intent on making of herself
A prime enchantress—to assist the work,
Which then was going forward in her name!
Not favoured spots alone, but the whole Earth,
The beauty wore of promise—that which sets
(As at some moments might not be unfelt
Among the bowers of Paradise itself)
The budding rose above the rose full blown.
. . . . . .
Why should I not confess that Earth was then
To me, what an inheritance, new-fallen,

Seems, when the first time visited, to one
Who thither comes to find in it his home?
He walks about and looks upon the spot
With cordial transport, moulds it and remoulds,
And is half pleased with things that are amiss,
'Twill be such joy to see them disappear.
Prelude XI, 105-121, 145-152.

He had caught the fatal hope that mankind may be reformed in masses, by statute.

The story of Wordsworth's life for the next six years is mainly the record of the slow, cruel disappointment of that hope. He must have seen some reason for distrust while yet in France. The dreary procession of events during that summer of 1792—the failure of the first constitution, the weakness of good helpless Lafayette, the growing power of the mob, the sack of the Tuileries, the downfall of the monarchy—they all argued ill for the reign of an ordered liberty. But Wordsworth would not abate his hope. In October he went up to Paris again, and seems for a little to have had a wild idea of offering his services to his Girondist friends in some military or political capacity. Just at that time, however, he was called home to England—"by a gracious Providence," he says, though improvidence might be an adequate explanation, since

it seems to have been an empty pocketbook that compelled his return. Fortunate it certainly was; for had he stayed a little longer he might have shared the fate of his friends, one more among the victims whom Robespierre sent up to look out at the little republican window. But he refused to give up his revolutionary sympathies, even in the face of the excesses of ninety-three.

In the course of that summer he wrote a remarkable Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, which he himself in his later years must have deemed a violently democratic paper. The Bishop, in a sermon, had arraigned the new French republic, and Wordsworth replies with a vigor which shows little respect either for the office or the ability of his opponent. He writes frankly as "a Republican," and defends the principles and excuses the excesses of the new French government. The seat of all just authority, he plainly avers, must be in the people themselves. Any attempt to restore to them suddenly the powers which rightly belong to them will, indeed, probably be accompanied by violence, and in many cases such attempt would be unwise; nevertheless it is to them that all authority ultimately belongs, and most of

the evils of modern life proceed from the fact that governors have forgotten or ignored the rights of the governed. Wordsworth's democracy is very thoroughgoing. The people he is willing to trust; but he boldly asserts that "the office of a king is a trial to which human virtue is not equal." The right of the ballot is universal; every Englishman without it is a "Helot." All legislation should aim to secure equality of position and opportunity, to prevent the undue accumulation of wealth and the degradation of labor. Primogeniture is an "unnatural monster," and artificial titles of nobility, "stars, ribbons, etc., an outrage to the dignity of a nation." The most extreme republican could hardly go further. Wordsworth had prudence enough not to publish his letter; that he could have written it at all, proves how ardent were his sympathies with what he deemed the cause of humanity.

He averred that the first great shock to his moral nature came when, early in that year, 1793, England declared war upon the Republic. He could hardly think it possible that in the churches at home holy men could entreat the Almighty for the defeat of that cause to which his best

hopes had been given. But worse was to follow. It was worse to see the rule of France surely passing into the hands of brutal fanatics, drunk with the best blood of the nation, and the whole country falling into an anarchy from which it could only be rescued by a despotism. France seemed to be repudiating all the principles upon which he had dreamed an ideal government might be based. And when, at last, she seemed quite to forget the liberty for which she began her struggle, changed her war of self-defense into a war of selfish and aggressive conquest, and sent for a pope to set an emperor's crown upon the head of the most gigantic robber of the century, then Wordsworth, like many another man, gave up his hope.

Few greater calamities can happen to any earnest young man, certainly to any young poet, than such a collapse of an early enthusiasm. It breaks the spring of imagination; it benumbs the faculty of faith and shakes his conviction of the Justice that sits behind the visible scheme of things. How severe this trial was for Wordsworth he has told us, with perhaps rather tedious fulness of analysis, in the later books of *The Prelude*. He seemed to have

lost not only his new confidence in man but his old joy in nature. He found nothing to believe or to enjoy.

For his recovery from this arid mood he was greatly indebted to his sister. Brother and sister had seen but little of each other since their childhood, but now, after Wordsworth's return from France, they were seldom apart. Wordsworth's life had been thus far mostly a solitary one; now he learned the charm of intimate personal sympathy. They made long walking trips together through the remoter parts of Yorkshire and Cumberland and revived the memories of their childhood. Her poetic observation, her cheerful enjoyment of all simple things, slowly called back to him the love of nature and the sympathy with humble folk. As he says,

> She gave me eyes, she gave me ears;
> And humble cares, and delicate fears;
> A heart, the fountain of sweet tears;
> And love, and thought, and joy.

In her companionship Wordsworth slowly regained a healthy content in life. But his ardent enthusiasm for a great public cause he could never regain. Heated liberalism when thus suddenly

cooled is likely to pass into very rigid conservatism. Wordsworth has been often accused of being a timid deserter from the great cause he had so warmly espoused in his youth. But that charge was never true. One of his editors, Mr. Grosart, goes so far in his defense as to affirm that to the end of his life Wordsworth would never have disavowed a single syllable of his Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff. It is probably true that he would have always admitted some form of democracy to be the ideal government, and all other forms to be excellent as they made an intelligent approach to that ideal. He certainly was always the warm friend of the humbler laboring classes, and the outspoken advocate of all legislation really tending to better the conditions of those classes. But as he grew older he distrusted more and more all revolutionary movements, even any sweeping measures of reform. He had lost his confidence in the people. He came to believe with increasing intensity of conviction that all social progress must begin with the individual, and be based on a cultivation of the affections.

Yet on the whole the great emotional crisis through which he passed was good for him, both

as man and as poet. It broadened and deepened his sympathy for his fellow men. It mellowed and humanized his temper. He heard through all his days thereafter the still sad music of humanity. It was this experience which really decided the character and the subjects of his poetry. The fall of his political hopes led him to throw himself more entirely upon the love for nature and the sympathy with the elementary virtues and homely affections of individual character. These are the stuff of which his best poetry is made. He had learned by hard experience and so could teach to others that the joys and hopes which abide are those which lie close to our hand, in the familiar shows of earth and sky in the lives of common men.

CHAPTER II

RACEDOWN AND THE EARLY POETRY

PROBABLY that empty pocketbook had something to do with Wordsworth's depression during the years that followed his return from France. He had chosen no profession. In 1794 he wrote to a friend, "I have been doing nothing, and still continue to do nothing. What is to become of me, I know not." His early dedication to poetry he had not forgotten, and as early as 1792, he had published two thin volumes of verse, *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches,* which very few people read then, and not many people read now. But poetry will not furnish daily bread. He had inherited little from his father save a claim for a loan to Lord Lowther which that nobleman was unwilling to repay. Two uncles had generously assisted him to his education, but they were unable to grant him much further aid, and he would have been unwilling to accept it. The pressure of homely

needs seemed to be forcing him into some definite and lucrative occupation. His friends had supposed he would enter either the church or the law; but he had no aptitude for either. For a little time he thought to find work on a London newspaper; but the ponderous gravity of his prose style must have been fatal to his efforts in journalism. But when the future seemed most dubious, he was suddenly relieved from further anxiety as to his career. In 1795, Mr. Raisley Calvert, a friend whom he had tended through a long illness, died and left him a legacy of nine hundred pounds—"an act," said the poet, years after, "done entirely from a confidence on his part that I had powers and attainments which might be of use to mankind." Wordsworth accepted this as a clear vocation to poetry, and at once abandoned all thought of any other career. He took a cottage at Racedown, in Dorsetshire, near the south coast, and here he and his sister Dorothy set up their simple housekeeping. Most men would have needed more than nine hundred pounds to insure them against the chances of the future; but no man had fewer wants that money can supply. He added to his slender income by taking one or two pupils; yet I estimate that during

their two years' stay in Racedown, brother and sister can not have spent between them more than seventy pounds a year.

Wordsworth could hardly have been attracted to Racedown by any special charm in its scenery or surroundings. It was simply the accident of a cottage at a cheap rent that drew him thither. Dorothy, who had the excellent gift of finding some beauty wherever she was, does indeed speak of very pleasant walks always sandy and dry, of hills her fancy tried to think were almost mountains, and of the view of the sea only two hundred yards from their door; but she admits that the spots which delight her most are some which can remind her of "her native wilds." The peasants of the region, she adds, unlike her Cumberland dalesmen, are wretchedly poor; in their shapeless cottages of wood and clay they are "not at all beyond what might be expected in savage life." Yet she avers that William and herself are "happy as human beings can be"; and the two years of the stay in Racedown were always a bright period in her memory. For to both it was their first experience of the settled quiet of a home. To Wordsworth, it was his first opportunity to devote himself without anxiety

or distraction to the life of a poet. He had the satisfaction of the man who has found his place and his work. The very remoteness of the region was welcome after the loud noises of futile controversy and revolution with which for the past four years his life had been filled. Time and place invited to tranquil memory and reflection, to the vision of those large truths seen only by

> That inner eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude.

It was in Racedown that his career as poet may be said to begin.

Yet it was not until the close of the Racedown period that Wordsworth really found himself. All the early verse is tentative at best, and none of it quite worthy his genius. *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches,* written in 1793, are interesting as good examples of his early treatment of nature. Considered merely as external description, indeed, they are excellent. It might be difficult, for example, to find in equal compass a more accurate picture of what may be seen on the shore of Lake Como, say in a walk from Cadenabbia to Menaggio, than is given in some thirty lines of the *Sketches.*

An Evening Walk is perhaps still better, in that the poet, not finding his interest in the novelty of the scene, dwells with more minute fidelity upon its familiar details. Fifty years later, when in his seventy-third year, he said there was not an image in that poem he had not observed, and that he still remembered the times and places where most of them were seen. Notice, for example, in such a passage as this how minute and truthful his observation of the play of light and color.

Just where a cloud above the mountain rears
An edge all flame, the broadening sun appears;
A long blue bar its ægis orb divides,
And breaks the spreading of its golden tides;
And now that orb has touched the purple steep,
Whose softened image penetrates the deep.
'Cross the calm lake's blue shades the cliffs aspire,
With towers and woods, a "prospect all on fire;"
While coves and secret hollows, through a ray
Of fainter gold, a purple gleam betray.
Each slip of lawn the broken rocks between
Shines in the light with more than earthly green:
Deep yellow beams the scattered stems illume,
Far in the level forest's central gloom:
Waving his hat, the shepherd, from the vale,
Directs his winding dog the cliffs to scale,—
The dog, loud barking, 'mid the glittering rocks,
Hunts, where his master points, the intercepted flocks.
Where oaks o'erhang the road the radiance shoots
On tawny earth, wild weeds, and twisted roots;

> The druid-stones a brightened ring unfold;
> And all the babbling brooks are liquid gold;
> Sunk to a curve, the day-star lessens still,
> Gives one bright glance, and drops behind the hill.
> *An Evening Walk*, 168-191.

This is the young Wordsworth. In the work of his more mature years he dwells less upon the details of external appearance; he does not describe, he rather interprets. His poetry of nature came to be subjective rather than objective; the record of his own feelings that respond to some meaning or influence of the outer world. But in this early verse he is content to record the phenomena of observation, one by one, with photographic accuracy. He says that before he had completed his fourteenth year he was convinced that "an infinite variety of natural appearances had been unnoticed by the poets of any age or country," and he "made a resolution to supply in some degree this deficiency." It is perhaps true that, though several of our early nature poets, Thomson, Collins, Gray, have shown greater power to render atmosphere and sentiment—as Collins, for example, does in the *Ode to Evening*—none of them had shown such detailed and vivid observation of familiar natural phenomena. It was this power which attracted the notice of the few

readers, like De Quincey and Coleridge, who saw in Wordsworth's early work the promise of a great poet. But, if we except some gleams of Wordsworth's early love of liberty in the *Sketches,* this wealth of detailed observation is the only thing of interest in these early poems. There is little imagination in them, almost nothing of the indefinable charm of poetic phrase. They are cast in the sing-song couplets which Pope had foisted upon English poetry, and such lines as this,

> The thundering tube the aged angler hears

may remind us that Wordsworth had not yet escaped the conventional dread of common words for common things.

Wordsworth's first attempt after settling in Racedown, was a tragedy. *The Borderers* may have some personal interest as indicating how the mind of Wordsworth, after his revolutionary experiences, was still struggling with moral problems. It is probably designed to show the fatal influence of a false philosophy over a young man of generous temper; but it was an unfortunate notion of Wordsworth's to throw his poem into the form of a raw and impossible drama. He may have been in-

fluenced by the growing liking for the cruder forms of romance in drama and fiction at that period. Certainly some of the action and scenery of the play recall the bugaboo terrors of Horace Walpole or Monk Lewis. This is the setting of the Fourth Act:

"A desolate prospect—a ridge of rocks—a Chapel on the summit of one—moon behind the rocks—night stormy—irregular sound of a bell—Hubert enters exhausted."

It is odd to see the good Mr. Wordsworth trying to be mysterious and creepy after this fashion. The austere and meditative young man, who never had any power to depict action or passion, living in quiet seclusion with his sister, sits down and writes with great effort a tragedy full of incredible violence from impossible motives. He had, at all events, the wisdom to recognize his failure, and kept the play in manuscript for nearly fifty years. In 1842, with something of an old man's indulgence for the failures of his youth, he included it among his other works; but few even among the lovers of the poet cared to read it.

Another poem finished at Racedown, though in great part written considerably earlier, is the *Guilt*

and Sorrow, a story—or rather two stories imperfectly joined—of poverty, crime and repentance, told in sixty-four Spenserian stanzas. It was suggested by Wordsworth's observation of the destitution and suffering among the English humbler classes, produced by a half-century of almost continuous war. The incidents of the poem, unlike those of *The Borderers,* are not improbable and all within the range of Wordsworth's natural sympathies. But it is not very well constructed, and its pathos is too sordid and pitiless. The effect of the poem is depressing. Wordsworth published only about a third of it in 1798, under the title, *The Female Vagrant,* though the whole, he says, was already written. Successive additions and alterations were made in after years, until it appeared in its present form in the edition of 1842.

In a third long poem of this period Wordsworth found, perhaps for the first time, a congenial theme. The story of Margaret, or, as he first called it, *The Ruined Cottage,* begun at Racedown, was continued and enlarged two years later at Alfoxden, but did not take its present form until incorporated into the First Book of *The Excursion,* 1814. It was this poem in its earliest form which Coleridge when he

had read it in the manuscript, declared "to be supreme, I hesitate not to aver, to anything in our language which in any way resembles it." Certainly the Margaret of *The Excursion* is one of Wordsworth's most pathetic and lovely characters, showing that calm patience, that union of gentleness and strength, which always appealed to his sympathy.

In June, 1797, the quiet of Racedown was enlivened by a most remarkable visitor. One of the very few readers who could discover genius in Wordsworth's early verse came to Dorsetshire to find the new poet. It was Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Never visitor who could better inspire a poet! For those were the days of Coleridge young, full of all high imaginings, with gift of converse like an angel, and of power to make the most abstruse philosophy sound musical as Apollo's lute. The young poets spent most of two days in reading aloud to each other their unpublished verse for mutual encouragement. "The first thing Coleridge read after he came," writes Dorothy, "was William's new poem *The Ruined Cottage,* with which he was much delighted; and after tea he repeated to us two acts of his tragedy *Osorio.* The next morning William

read his tragedy, *The Borderers.*" The visit seems to have instantly aroused in Coleridge an extravagant admiration for his new friend. In a letter written next day he avers that he feels himself a little man by his side; Wordsworth's big tragedy "is absolutely wonderful," with profound touches of the human heart, such as are found three or four times in Schiller's *Robbers,* "but in *Wordsworth there are* no *inequalities.* T. Poole's opinion of Wordsworth is that he is the greatest man he ever knew: I coincide." Coleridge's enthusiasm soon cooled enough to permit a more discriminating estimate of Wordsworth and his poetry; but this meeting was the beginning of a lifelong friendship of great profit to both. Coleridge was then living in the little village of Nether Stowey on the edge of the Quantock hills in the adjoining county of Somersetshire. The Wordsworths visited him there very shortly after his return from Racedown; and learning that Alfoxden, a spacious country mansion in the neighborhood at that time vacant, was to be let at a moderate price, they took it, and at once removed thither. Before the middle of July, 1797, they were settled in Alfoxden House, and a new period in their life had begun.

CHAPTER III

ALFOXDEN AND GRASMERE

THE scenery about Wordsworth's new residence was all a poet could desire. Dorothy writes in her Journal, "There is everything here; sea, woods as wild as fancy ever painted, brooks clear and pebbly as in Cumberland; villages so romantic." The few lovers of Wordsworth who visit that region to-day find it hardly altered since the poet was there. In front of Alfoxden House the ground rises in a gentle succession of hills until you catch a glimpse of the sea some miles away. In the rear of the house and sweeping round one side of it is a reach of noble forest. The path to Nether Stowey, on the other side, leads through a wooded park and along a shaded glen where the summer silence is broken only by the tinkle of a brook that plays hide-and-seek among the trees till it slips over a tiny fall. This dell was a favorite haunt of Wordsworth and his sister; it was here that, one

day in 1798, he wrote the familiar *Lines Written in Early Spring.*

I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sate reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played,
Their thoughts I cannot measure:—
But the least motion which they made,
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?

Coleridge at Nether Stowey was only a short three miles away and saw the Wordsworths almost daily. It is pleasant to think of them during the bright summer of 1798, out-of-door alway, roaming through whole days over the smooth sea-ward-looking Quantock hills; Dorothy Wordsworth usually in their company, agile, supple of mind and body, with a tremulous delicacy of feeling that glowed in her great eyes and threw over her plain face a gleam of strange spiritual beauty; while Wordsworth walked in grave, musing silence, and Coleridge would talk—talk endlessly as in some high rapture of thought. "We are three people, with only one soul," said Coleridge; forgetting too often, it may be feared, poor little Mrs. Coleridge who sat at home in the cottage with her babes. There were some noteworthy visitors, too. In July of 1797, just after the Wordsworths' removal hither from Racedown, Charles and Mary Lamb came down from London to spend a week's outing with their old friend Coleridge, and met Wordsworth for the first time. Next June, young William Hazlitt, captivated by the eloquence of Coleridge preaching in his father's church, made a pilgrimage to Nether Stowey, and told the story of his visit in the most

delightful narrative essay to be found anywhere in the English language.

The two poets lived here together just one year. It was for both a most fruitful period: for the poetry of Coleridge it was the one *annus mirabilis*. Their intimate companionship was most helpful to both. Both stood at the threshold of active life; both had passed through experiences that left them in sympathy with the new social and moral movements; both just now were specially interested in poetry. Nor is it difficult to see the specific service that each rendered to the other. The acute but restless intellectual temper of Coleridge, beginning a hundred things and finishing none, doubtless gained something of steadiness and persistence from the slow and stubborn resolution of Wordsworth. At all events, it was only while under the influence of Wordsworth that Coleridge ever completed anything. *The Ancient Mariner, Love,* and the three or four other short poems written at Nether Stowey are each entire and perfect; that excellence he never attained afterward.

On the other hand, Wordsworth gained quite as much from the influence of Coleridge. His poetry thus far had been mostly task-work, careful but spiritless; the buoyant enthusiasm and

warm imagination of his friend served to give to his cold and labored verse new inspiration and spontaneity. Moreover, the remarkable metric gift of Coleridge, which makes some passages in the *Kubla Khan* and *Ancient Mariner* marvels of poetic melody, must have done something to correct the halting and pedestrian manner of Wordsworth, who never had a nice ear for the musical effects of verse. Another influence of Coleridge, though not so immediately evident, and perhaps in the opinion of some readers not so fortunate, was most pervasive and permanent of all. For Coleridge was a philosopher by nature, and a poet only by accident. He had already given proof of his remarkable penetration and originality of thought. Even those who knew him but slightly felt the fascination of his converse. Young William Hazlitt when first he heard him declared, "I could not have been more delighted if I had heard the music of the spheres. Poetry and Philosophy had met together. Truth and Genius had embraced, under the eye and with the sanction of Religion." Certainly no one could associate intimately with him for a year, as Wordsworth did, without coming to share his interest in the most profound questions of

philosophy and life. Wordsworth himself was, as we have seen, a man of reflective, introverted habit of mind; but it is evident that his thinking gained greatly in depth by his acquaintance with Coleridge. A comparison of the first books of *The Prelude*, written in 1799, with *An Evening Walk* and the *Descriptive Sketches* relating the same incidents, will show that he had learned to place a deeper philosophy under his views both of nature and of human life. From his early work there is little to be learned; after 1797 he begins to show those profound truths which so often redeem the dulness of his later verse, and which make of poems like *The Happy Warrior* and the *Ode to Duty* a kind of gospel. From that time onward his "best and favorite aspiration" was to write

> . . . Some philosophic song
> Of Truth that cherishes our daily life.

The two friends were not only discussing poetry, they were making it, each after his kind. It soon became evident to them that the kinds were to be very different. In a familiar passage of the *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge writes: "The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not

recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such as will be found in every village and vicinity where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them when they present themselves." Of course the poems of the first class were to be written by Coleridge; those of the second class, by Wordsworth.

This agreement for a division of poetic effort probably followed the failure of their one well-known attempt at collaboration. In the autumn of 1797 they had begun jointly the composition of *The Ancient Mariner*. But as the plan of the poem grew, Wordsworth found his imagination could not be at home in such strange regions; he withdrew, after contributing only two or three lines, and betook himself to humbler themes. Nearly all his verse of the Alfoxden period is in the form of

short and homely lyrics of the poor, like *Simon Lee* or *The Thorn.* But in the supreme poem of the period, the *Lines Above Tintern Abbey,* composed in a single day of the summer of 1798, he found genuinely sublime utterance for his sense of the meaning and influence of what we call Nature.

By midsummer of the year 1797 the two poets had in hand enough verse to fill a thin volume; and brisk little Mr. Amos Cottle, the bookseller of Bristol, whose acquaintance Coleridge had made the year before, ventured to publish it in the autumn. And thus, just twelve years after Robert Burns had issued his first edition, the new poetry began in England with a small anonymous volume of verse, published by an obscure Bristol bookseller, and bearing the title *Lyrical Ballads.* The first poem in this volume was *The Ancient Mariner,* the last was the *Lines Above Tintern Abbey.* All but three of the twenty-one poems it contained were by Wordsworth.

Mr. Cottle had undoubtedly made a bad bargain for himself. The public at first refused to read *Lyrical Ballads,* and the copyright a year later was estimated as worth just nothing at all. Yet this little book marks an epoch in English literary his-

tory. Within its covers we have excellent specimens of three different kinds of poetic subject often included in the vague epithet romantic—the poetry of pure romance, of humble realism, and of the mystic interpretation of nature.

Before the *Lyrical Ballads* were published the two poets had left England together to spend the winter in Germany. Coleridge was to study philosophy in the universities; and Wordsworth and his sister, finding they would not be allowed to remain in Alfoxden House another year, resolved to accompany him. It is possible that their departure was hastened by a foolish suspicion that they entertained dangerous political opinions. John Thelwall, a rather shallow and noisy Republican, had visited Coleridge for a few days in the previous summer. His presence had shocked the neighborhood, and the government, easily terrified in those days, seems to have sent down a spy to watch these two poets who had no definite occupation and no very visible means of support. The worthy old lady who owned Alfoxden probably did not care to have her house occupied by such a suspicious person and decided to resume occupancy herself.

Once in Germany the two friends separated.

Coleridge went to Göttingen; Wordsworth took residence in Goslar and spent the winter in what, Heaven knows, are the most depressing circumstances any civilized country can impose, starving and shivering in a provincial German town. But the chill and gloom of that winter, by a process of contrast not difficult to understand, brought back to Wordsworth's recollection with unusual vividness the imaginative charm of those early days at Hawkshead. It was in Goslar that he wrote the first best books of *The Prelude.* It was in Goslar, too, that with no companion but his sister, and no interest in his surroundings, driven in upon his own memories, he produced some of the most perfect lyrics he ever wrote, the *Matthew* poems, the *Poet's Epitaph,* and the group, most touching of all his verse, the five poems on *Lucy.* I know of no other figure in our poetry about whom there lingers such an atmosphere of pensive sadness; this maid seems the embodiment of all the purity and tender grace of nature.

I

Strange fits of passion have I known:
And I will dare to tell,
But in the Lover's ear alone,
What once to me befell.

When she I loved looked every day
  Fresh as a rose in June,
I to her cottage bent my way,
  Beneath an evening-moon.

Upon the moon I fixed my eye,
  All over the wide lea;
With quickening pace my horse drew nigh
  Those paths so dear to me.

And now we reached the orchard-plot;
  And, as we climbed the hill,
The sinking moon to Lucy's cot
  Came near, and nearer still.

In one of those sweet dreams I slept,
  Kind Nature's gentlest boon!
And all the while my eyes I kept
  On the descending moon.

My horse moved on; hoof after hoof
  He raised, and never stopped:
When down behind the cottage roof,
  At once, the bright moon dropped.

What fond and wayward thoughts will slide
  Into a Lover's head!
"O mercy!" to myself I cried,
  "If Lucy should be dead!"

II

I traveled among unknown men,
  In lands beyond the sea;
Nor, England! did I know till then
  What love I bore to thee.

'Tis past, that melancholy dream!
Nor will I quit thy shore
A second time; for still I seem
To love thee more and more.

Among thy mountains did I feel
The joy of my desire;
And she I cherished turned her wheel
Beside an English fire.

Thy mornings showed, thy nights concealed,
The bowers where Lucy played;
And thine too is the last green field
That Lucy's eyes surveyed.

III

Three years she grew in sun and shower,
Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This Child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own.

"Myself will to my darling be
Both law and impulse: and with me
The Girl, in rock and plain,
In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain.

"She shall be sportive as the fawn
That wild with glee across the lawn

Or up the mountain springs;
And hers shall be the breathing balm,
And hers the silence and the calm
Of mute insensate things.

"The floating clouds their state shall lend
To her; for her the willow bend;
Nor shall she fail to see
Even in the motions of the Storm
Grace that shall mould the Maiden's form
By silent sympathy.

"The stars of midnight shall be dear
To her; and she shall lean her ear
In many a secret place
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face.

"And vital feelings of delight
Shall rear her form to stately height,
Her virgin bosom swell;
Such thoughts to Lucy I will give
While she and I together live
Here in this happy dell."

Thus Nature spake—The work was done—
How soon my Lucy's race was run!
She died, and left to me
This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;
The memory of what has been,
And never more will be.

One would think it must have been some pathetic memory of his own that speaks in the utter, heart-

breaking simplicity of those lines we all know—some of us, alas! too well!

IV

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
  Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
  And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone
  Half hidden from the eye!
—Fair as a star, when only one
  Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
  When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
  The difference to me!

Or those other stanzas of even more hopeless, benumbing loss:

V

A slumber did my spirit seal;
  I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
  The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
  She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
  With rocks, and stones, and trees.

But upon these poems Wordsworth never made, so far as is known, a single word of comment or

explanation. It is an idle curiosity that would seek to penetrate the secret of that memory, pure, passionless, holy, which would only half reveal.

With early spring Wordsworth and Dorothy were back in England again. They spent the summer and autumn jaunting about among friends, and on the last day of that year 1799 they took up their abode in a cottage just outside the village of Grasmere. Wordsworth had found his home. He had returned to the region that had always been in his memory, and that had filled his early years with those images and emotions out of which his best poetry was to be made. Nothing can render more truly the beauty of the Grasmere valley and its atmosphere of lofty repose than some lines from his unfinished poem, *The Recluse,* never published during his lifetime.

> Embrace me then, ye Hills, and close me in;
> Now in the clear and open day I feel
> Your guardianship; I take it to my heart;
> 'Tis like the solemn shelter of the night.
> But I would call thee beautiful, for mild,
> And soft, and gay, and beautiful thou art
> Dear Valley, having in thy face a smile
> Though peaceful, full of gladness. Thou art pleased,
> Pleased with thy crags and woody steeps, thy Lake,
> Its one green island and its winding shores;

The multitude of little rocky hills,
Thy Church and cottages of mountain stone
Clustered like stars some few, but single most,
And lurking dimly in their shy retreats,
Or glancing at each other cheerful looks
Like separated stars with clouds between.
What want we? have we not perpetual streams,
Warm woods, and sunny hills, and fresh green fields,
And mountains not less green, and flocks and herds,
And thickets full of songsters, and the voice
Of lordly birds, an unexpected sound
Heard now and then from morn to latest eve
Admonishing the man who walks below
Of solitude and silence in the sky?
These have we, and a thousand nooks of earth
Have also these, but nowhere else is found,
Nowhere (or is it fancy?) can be found
The one sensation that is here; 'tis here,
Here as it found its way into my heart
In childhood, here as it abides by day,
By night, here only; or in chosen minds
That take it with them hence, where'er they go.
—'Tis, but I cannot name it, 'tis the sense
Of majesty, and beauty, and repose,
A blended holiness of earth and sky,
Something that makes this individual spot,
This small abiding-place of many men,
A termination, and a last retreat,
A centre, come from wheresoe'er you will,
A whole without dependence or defect,
Made for itself, and happy in itself,
Perfect contentment, Unity entire.

The Recluse, 110-151.

No other place can be quite so redolent of Wordsworth's best years as that Dove Cottage where he first took up his Grasmere residence, and which still stands, much as he left it, with its tiny garden and orchard-ground sloping up the mountain side,

> Its own dear brook, its own small pasture,
> Almost its own sky.

The scenes made memorable by his verse—Grasmere Lake with its one green islet, the slow flowing Rothay, the gray and venerable church, the "lonely moor" of the Leech Gatherer, the wishing gate, the site of Michael's sheep-fold, the long ascent of Dunmail raise, the height of Stone Arthur that "parleys with the setting sun," the distant peaks of Langdale keeping watch over their lonely valley—they are all hard by, or, at farthest, within the horizon that bounds the view from the cottage door. One likes to linger in thought upon the story of his eight happy years spent here, as we get glimpses of them in the Journal of Dorothy Wordsworth or the gossip of De Quincey. One can picture him with Dorothy in the little library up-stairs, by his "half kitchen half parlor fire," where he would sit musing for hours,

> In the loved presence of my cottage fire,
> And listen to the flapping of the flame,
> Or kettle whispering its faint under-song.

Still more natural is it to picture him striding over the valley paths, in all seasons and in all weathers, into Far Easedale or over into Langdale, up the mountain side by Green Head ghyll, or on the flanks of Helvellyn, shaping his thoughts and fancies into verse. A tall grave man, who looks almost a score of years older than he is, he stoops a little as he walks; his legs, though they serve his purpose admirably, are, little Mr. De Quincey assures us, decidedly not ornamental, and there is in his bearing and movements a certain sturdy rusticity. But his face, though long and homely, is noble, with striking features and deep searching eyes. A noteworthy man to look upon, though seeming more the philosopher than the poet.

Wordsworth's only companion in the first two years at Grasmere was his sister Dorothy. And never was companionship more perfect. Dorothy was in many respects the opposite of her brother. Alert, vivacious, with a nervous activity in all her movements, she had a buoyant life and an impassioned sympathy that were an admirable complement

to the grave and rather slow-moving temperament of her brother. Never really beautiful of form or feature, yet her quick-glancing intelligence and her keen sense of the best joys of life played

> In the shooting lights
> Of her wild eyes,

and threw over her plain face a better charm than beauty. It is evident that Coleridge, Hazlitt and De Quincey all in turn felt a certain fascination in her presence. But she gave herself to her brother with an entire and self-forgetful devotion. A genuine poet herself, though without "the accomplishment of verse," she was as ardent a lover of all the outdoor world as her brother, and her observation was even more sensitive and delicate. She was often the companion of his walks; whatever he could see she could see too, and often she saw it first. The germs of many of his poems may be found in some simple incident or wayside object noticed in her Journal. This Journal, which records the daily life of the brother and sister in those early Grasmere years, one is tempted to call the most delightful prose idyl in our literature. It should be read by every one who would understand the influences surrounding Wordsworth in his best period.

Some brief passages may be cited here to show at once Dorothy's admiring love for her brother, the minute accuracy of her vision, and her intense joy in the familiar sights and sounds of nature about her home.

"Tuesday, 24th.—It was very windy, and we heard the wind everywhere about us as we went along the lane. As we were going along, we were stopped at once, at a distance of perhaps fifty yards from our favorite birch tree. It was yielding to the gusty wind with all its tender twigs. The sun shone upon it, and it glanced in the wind like a flying sunshiny shower. It was a tree in shape, with stems and branches, but it was like a spirit of water. The sun went in, and it resumed its purplish appearance, the twigs still yielding to the wind, but not so visibly to us.

"Saturday, 26th.—We walked to Rydale. Grasmere Lake a beautiful image of stillness, clear as glass, reflecting all things. The wind was up and the waters sounding. The lake a rich purple, the fields a soft yellow, the copses red-brown, the mountains purple, the church and buildings, how quiet they were!

"Wednesday.—William went up into the orchard and finished the poem. I went and sate with W. and walked backward and forward in the orchard till dinner time. He read me his poem. I read it to him, and my Beloved slept. A sweet evening, as it had been a sweet day, and I walked quietly along the side of Rydal lake with quiet thoughts—the hills and the lake were still—the owls had not begun to hoot, and the little birds had given over singing. I looked before me and saw a red light upon Silver How as if coming out of the vale below,

> There was a light of most strange birth,
> A light that came out of the earth,
> And spread along the dark hillside.

Thus I was going on when I saw the shape of my Beloved in the road at a little distance. We turned back to see the light, but it was fading—almost gone. The owls hooted when we sat on the wall at the foot of White Moss; the sky broke more and more, and we saw the moon now and then.

"Saturday May 1st.—I sowed the flowers, William helped me. We then went and sate in the orchard until dinner time. It was very hot. William wrote *The Celandine*. We planned a shed, for the sun was too hot for us. After dinner we went

again to our old resting place in the Hollins, under the rock. We first lay under the holly, where we saw nothing but the holly tree, and a budding elm tree mossed, with the sky above our heads. . . . When the sun had got low enough we went to the Rock Shade. Oh, the overwhelming beauty of the vale below, greener than green! Two ravens flew high, high in the sky, and the sun shone upon their bellies and their wings, long after there was none of his light to be seen, but a little space on the top of Loughrigg Fell. Heard the cuckoo to-day, this first of May. We went down to tea at 8 o'clock, and returned after tea. The landscape was fading; sheep and lambs quiet among the rocks. The sky was perfectly cloudless. Three solitary stars in the middle of the blue vault, one or two on the points of the high hills.

"Friday, May 14th.—After dinner I worked bread, then came and mended stockings beside William; he fell asleep. After tea I walked to Rydale for letters. It was a strange night. The hills were covered over with a slight covering of hail or snow, just so as to give them a hoary winter look, with the black rocks. The woods looked miserable, the coppices green as grass, which looked quite unnat-

ural, and they seemed half shriveled up, as if they shrank from the air. O, thought I, what a beautiful thing God had made winter to be, by stripping the trees and letting us see their shapes and forms. What a freedom does it seem to give to the storms!

Thursday, July 8th.—In the afternoon I read the *Winter's Tale;* then I went to bed, but did not sleep. The swallows stole in and out of their nest, and sate there, whiles quite still, whiles they sang low for two minutes or more at a time, just like a muffled robin. William was looking at *The Pedlar* when I got up. He arranged it, and after tea I wrote it out—two hundred eighty lines. The moon was behind. William hurried me out in hopes that I should see her. We walked first to the top of the hill to see Rydale. It was dark and dull, but our own vale was very solemn—the shape of Helm Crag was quite distinct, though black. We walked backwards and forwards on the White Moss path; there was a sky-like white brightness on the lake. The Wyke cottage right at the foot of Silver How. Glow-worms out, but not so numerous as last night. O, beautiful place! Dear Mary, William. The hour is come. . . . I must prepare to go. The swallows, I must leave them, the wall, the garden, the

roses, all. Dear creatures! they sang last night after I was in bed; seemed to be singing to one another, just before they settled to rest for the night. Well, I must go. Farewell!"

This last entry was written the night before Wordsworth and his sister—to use his rather unromantic phrase—"went to fetch Mrs. Wordsworth." They were gone two months on their visit to the Yorkshire home of Mary Hutchinson, and when they returned she accompanied them as the poet's wife. Wordsworth in his pleasing poem of *Farewell* to the cottage, evidently shares Dorothy's personal affection for the spot and a kind of reluctance to leave it temporarily, even to bring back to it a bride.

Farewell, thou little Nook of mountain-ground,
Thou rocky corner in the lowest stair
Of that magnificent temple which doth bound
One side of our whole vale with grandeur rare;
Sweet garden-orchard, eminently fair,
The loveliest spot that man hath ever found,
Farewell!—we leave thee to Heaven's peaceful care,
Thee, and the Cottage which thou dost surround.

Our boat is safely anchored by the shore,
And there will safely ride when we are gone;
The flowering shrubs that deck our humble door
Will prosper, though untended and alone:

Fields, goods, and far-off chattels we have none:
These narrow bounds contain our private store
Of things earth makes, and sun doth shine upon;
Here are they in our sight—we have no more.

Sunshine and shower be with you, bud and bell!
For two months now in vain we shall be sought;
We leave you here in solitude to dwell
With these our latest gifts of tender thought;
Thou, like the morning, in thy saffron coat,
Bright gowan, and marsh-marigold, farewell!
Whom from the borders of the Lake we brought,
And placed together near our rocky Well.

We go for One to whom ye will be dear;
And she will prize this Bower, this Indian shed,
Our own contrivance, Building without peer!
—A gentle Maid, whose heart is lowly bred,
Whose pleasures are in wild fields gatherèd,
With joyousness, and with a thoughtful cheer,
Will come to you; to you herself will wed;
And love the blessed life that we lead here.

Dear Spot! which we have watched with tender heed,
Bringing thee chosen plants and blossoms blown
Among the distant mountains, flower and weed,
Which thou hast taken to thee as thy own,
Making all kindness registered and known;
Thou for our sakes, though Nature's child indeed,
Fair in thyself and beautiful alone,
Hast taken gifts which thou dost little need.

And O most constant, yet most fickle Place,
That hast thy wayward moods, as thou dost show

To them who look not daily on thy face;
Who, being loved, in love no bounds dost know,
And say'st, when we forsake thee, "Let them go!"
Thou easy-hearted Thing, with thy wild race
Of weeds and flowers, till we return be slow,
And travel with the year at a soft pace.

Help us to tell Her tales of years gone by,
And this sweet spring, the best beloved and best;
Joy will be flown in its mortality;
Something must stay to tell us of the rest.
Here, thronged with primroses, the steep rock's breast
Glittered at evening like a starry sky;
And in this bush our sparrow built her nest,
Of which I sang one song that will not die.

O happy Garden! whose seclusion deep
Hath been so friendly to industrious hours;
And to soft slumbers, that did gently steep
Our spirits, carrying with them dreams of flowers,
And wild notes warbled among leafy bowers;
Two burning months let summer overleap,
And, coming back with Her who will be ours,
Into thy bosom we again shall creep.

The coming of Mrs. Wordsworth made Dove Cottage in the fullest sense a home. No one could have been better fitted to enter and to complete the life there. She had known from her childhood both the poet and his sister. She did not share the high austerity of Wordsworth nor the restless impulsiveness of Dorothy; but she understood them both.

She was a woman of quiet dignity but of warmest sympathies. De Quincey, who met her some years after her marriage, speaks of her "winning expression of benignity," her "native goodness of manner," and "the womanly self-respect speaking through all her looks." It is the highest proof of the tact and of the sweetness of her nature that she never showed any trace of jealousy at the singular companionship of brother and sister, but passed gladly and graciously into their life to make a better home for both. Dorothy, for her part, never feared a rival in the friendship of her brother, but rather welcomed one who could shed upon his lofty reserve the light and warmth of a new affection. Nor did the marriage divide or lessen the close comradeship of brother and sister; indeed, it is probable that the natural assumption of household duties by Mrs. Wordsworth left Dorothy more free for those long walks she had always enjoyed.

Here the narrative of Wordsworth's outward life may close. He lived all his remaining years within two miles of this spot where he had first made his Grasmere home. When the Dove Cottage became too narrow for the needs of his increasing family, he left it, and in 1808 removed to a larger house at

Allan Bank at the farther end of the lake. Thence he removed, in 1811, to the rectory opposite the Grasmere church, and two years later to the house at Rydal Mount overlooking the little lake of Rydal Water, where his last thirty-eight years were passed. The whole half-century was without any noteworthy external incident or any reversal of the main currents of his thought. He had his share of the sorrows that must always walk hand in hand with love—the loss of his brother at sea; the death of two of his children when hardly past infancy; the death of that deeply-loved daughter Dora, who lived long enough to preside for too short a time over a home of her own; the illness that clouded all the later years of Dorothy—but sorrows only deepened and mellowed his feeling. He could say

> A deep distress hath humanized my soul.

Years stole from him inevitably something of his early vision and utterance; but he was true to his vocation of poet to the end. It would be hard to find a life more gravely serene, more free from the stress of worldly desire, more filled with high and calm imaginings.

Doubtless Wordsworth's truest inspiration was

beginning somewhat to decline before he left Dove Cottage. Mr. Arnold does not much exaggerate when he says that all Wordsworth's first-rate work was produced in the decade 1798-1808. In spite of early neglect and contempt he had never questioned his ability and duty as poet. While altogether without vanity or loud self-assertion, he had by nature a certain calm but obstinate self-confidence. Not discouraged by the reception of the *Lyrical Ballads,* he issued, in 1800, a second, enlarged, edition with the famous *Preface* in which he boldly affirms that poetry can find its fittest themes and also fittest phrase in the lives and speech of humble folk. In 1807 he published his *Poems in Two Volumes,* including all his work thus far. By this time the number of readers who could appreciate and enjoy his poetry had considerably increased, and the criticism in some quarters began to grow more intelligent; but the great public who in those years hailed with loud acclaim the *Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *Marmion,* could hardly be expected to care for *Michael* or *The Leech Gatherer,* or for verses on daisies and daffodils. Yet Wordsworth was content to bide his time. In an

oft-quoted letter to Lady Beaumont in 1808 he expresses his "calm confidence that these poems will live. . . . Every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be seen. . . . To conclude, my ears are stone deaf to this idle buzz, and my flesh insensible to these petty stings. I doubt not that you will share with me an invincible confidence that my writings (and among them these little poems) will co-operate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society wherever found; and that they will, in their degree, be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier." This confidence was rewarded by a sense of slow growth in the interest of the public; but it was his misfortune that his next volume was the long poem *The Excursion*. *The Excursion* contains many passages of genuine poetry, passages that show Wordsworth almost at his best; but it is in large part prose in metrical form—dignified, thoughtful, wise, but pedestrian. The inspiration of the poet is displaced by the reflection of the philosopher and the student of society. Wordsworth was winning his long-deserved fame just as he was beginning to lose

the ability to extend or to sustain it. Almost all the body of verse his resolute good intention produced after about 1820 we could give up without great sense of loss.

CHAPTER IV

LIMITATIONS AND DEFECTS

WE who admire Wordsworth may be inclined to censure the blindness of his early critics; yet we must admit that his genius has certain limitations that make it impossible he should ever be in any strict sense a popular poet, and which impair the effect even of some of his best work. It is well we should recognize this at the outset, and not expect from him what he can not give.

There are certain great realms of poetry which he never enters. He had, for instance, little sense of the poetic charm of movement and passion; he could never be just to that verse which quickens the pulse, or stirs the heart like a trumpet peal. He had no voice for love or war. All the more restless and stirring exhibitions of passion he regarded as proof of that lack of temperance and self-command which he deemed the worst form of moral weakness. Such poetry as that of Byron he abominated.

> The gods approve the depth
> And not the tumult of the soul

he says with Olympian dignity. There was a vein of asceticism in the man; he seemed a little afraid of all ardent passion, however pure. It is Hazlitt, I think, who says we might infer from Wordsworth's poetry that there is no such thing as marrying or giving in marriage. He is reported to have once thought of writing a love poem, but gave it up because, as he gravely says, "I feared I might write it with a degree of warmth which could hardly have been approved by my principles, and which might have been undesirable for the reader." Most readers, I judge, will decide that he might have taken that risk with perfect safety. His two poems to his wife,

> She was a phantom of delight

and

> O dearer far than life and light are dear,

both written after years of married life, are filled with the serene and steady joy of long-tried affection and deep spiritual sympathy; but either of them might have been addressed to his sister. Indeed the first four lines of the former, the only lines

suggesting an unreflecting ardor, were originally written of that Highland girl whom he met for a moment at Inversnaid when on a walking tour.

She was a Phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight;
A lovely Apparition, sent
To be a moment's ornament;
Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair;
Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair;
But all things else about her drawn
From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;
A dancing Shape, an Image gay,
To haunt, to startle, and waylay.

I saw her upon nearer view,
A Spirit, yet a Woman too!
Her household motions light and free,
And steps of virgin-liberty;
A countenance in which did meet
Sweet records, promises as sweet;
A Creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food;
For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles.

And now I see with eye serene
The very pulse of the machine;
A Being breathing thoughtful breath,
A Traveller between life and death;
The reason firm, the temperate will,
Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill;

A perfect Woman, nobly planned,
To warn, to comfort, and command;
And yet a Spirit still, and bright
With something of angelic light.

There is emotion enough in Wordsworth's verse certainly, pathos as deep and reverence as august as may be anywhere found in modern English poetry; but it is always calm and self-controlled. We shall not look in his page for the buoyant life, that intense and unrestrained emotion which are so captivating, for example, in Burns. These we can not expect from such a self-contained and meditative genius. We must be content to take in their place a more quiet—some of us think, a deeper—charm. Wordsworth himself has well expressed the two contrasted tempers in his lines to the nightingale.

O Nightingale! thou surely art
A creature of a "fiery heart;"—
These notes of thine—they pierce and pierce—
Tumultuous harmony and fierce!
Thou sing'st as if the God of wine
Had helped thee to a Valentine;
A song in mockery and despite
Of shades, and dews, and silent night;
And steady bliss, and all the loves
Now sleeping in these peaceful groves.

I heard a Stock-dove sing or say
His homely tale, this very day;
His voice was buried among trees,
Yet to be come at by the breeze:
He did not cease; but cooed—and cooed;
And somewhat pensively he wooed;
He sang of love, with quiet blending,
Slow to begin, and never ending;
Of serious faith, and inward glee;
That was the song—the song for me!

And for all of us, let us trust; yet so long as the world keeps its youth, and the blood runs warm and red, the nightingale's fiery heart is, and shall be, a fountain of poesy.

With this cool self-centered temperament, Wordsworth could have but little sense of the romantic. The pomp and circumstance, the romantic and grandiose externals that blazon the procession of human fates, the curious and wondrous adventures that often diversify the story of individual lives—these things got no hold upon his imagination. It is true that in his boyhood he read *Don Quixote* and some other romantic fiction, and in maturer years among the few books he still cared for, he names as "pre-eminently dear," Shakespeare's *Othello* and Spenser's *Fairy Queen.*

The gentle lady married to the Moor,
And heavenly Una with her milk-white lamb.

But there is little trace of this romantic reading in his poetry. He tells us, it is true, in the First Book of *The Prelude,* that when casting about for a subject of that long poem, he passed in review a series of heroic figures from Homer to Gustavus Adolphus one of whom might seem to embody and illustrate in action the "general truths" of human life he wished to convey; but no one could arrest and detain his interest, and he finally chose himself as the person he knew best. And this search for a heroic figure may probably have been prompted by a temptation to avail himself of the growing popularity of romantic themes rather than by any personal preference. For the contemporary romantic drama and fiction he certainly had no liking. He feared the influence upon the public mind of what he called "a degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation." Even Scott's poetry, which all the world was reading and praising, he never estimated very highly; "it has nothing for the immortal part of man," he said. Indeed it was his protest against the appeal of much romantic literature to what he thought idle curiosity or crude and morbid emotion, that led him to look for his subjects too exclusively in the lives of "the middle and lower classes of so-

ciety," and then to defend his practise by the extreme statements of the *Preface* to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. There certainly is very genuine poetry to be found among humble and rustic folk; Wordsworth seemed too much inclined to think it could be found nowhere else.

Moreover, Wordsworth shows in various ways a lack of purely esthetic appreciation. He had none of that delight in beauty for its own sake which could put Keats into such a fine rapture. He never would have said

> A thing of beauty is a joy forever.

He said rather,

> To me the meanest flower that blows *can give Thoughts* that do often lie too deep for tears.

Of mere beauty of sense he never had any keen enjoyment; such enjoyment implies a certain delicacy of physical organization which Wordsworth did not possess. In spite of what is sometimes said to the contrary, I find no evidence that any one of his five senses, save perhaps that of hearing, was especially acute. Beauty certainly did not appeal to him unless it hid some moral suggestion. In his nature poetry he had, as every one knows, a re-

markable power to catch the spiritual expression of the scene, to interpret its moral meanings; but to the mere outer charm of the landscape, its picturesqueness of form or changing tints of color, he often seems quite insensible. His sister Dorothy had a much quicker eye for the various charm on the face of the world. Doubtless the highest forms of beauty are those which convey ethical suggestion; it may possibly be true, as Ruskin held, that the effect of all beauty proceeds ultimately from its power to reveal some elemental moral truth. But it is none the less indubitably true that poetry may be overneglectful of that delight which rests content in the deliverances of the sense without consciousness of further meaning. As Fra Lippo says in Browning's poem,

> If you get simple beauty and naught else
> You get about the best thing God invents.

The truth is, that Wordsworth was at bottom a moralist. The ethical perception was always dominant in his thought. A moral motive, often half unconscious, was always behind his work; he took little interest in any subject unless he felt it to be vitally related to the inner life of men. Doubtless

this absorption in moral ideas gives to his poetry at its best, as we shall see later, an austere elevation and an abiding spiritual power such as no other contemporary poet could attain. When he is genuinely inspired, Wordsworth has no equal among early nineteenth century poets. But then he is not always inspired. The mere ethical interest does not always suffice to arouse imagination and emotion, and then his poetry becomes bare and cold. Wordsworth the poet drops into Wordsworth the preacher, and the sermon is sometimes very long and very commonplace.

It is this esthetic dulness that accounts for Wordsworth's lack of artistic judgment in the workmanship of his poems. No great poet was ever less an artist. Only a defective sense of form and proportion can explain the intolerable *longueurs* of *The Excursion* and many of his other later poems. Nor had he a sensitive ear for the music of verse. He was not a born singer. Occasionally, indeed, a short lyric or some inspired passage in the longer poems passed spontaneously into music. The *Lucy* poems and *The Highland Reaper* are examples. But as a rule his lyrics are not tuneful; and even the loftier passages in the *Sonnets, Odes* and *Prelude*

owe their effect to a sheer sublimity of thought without much aid from the movement or music of the verse. No one would look to Wordsworth for the best examples of the musical possibilities of poetry.

Still less had he any nicer appreciation of that indefinable magic of individual words upon which the charm of poetry often largely depends. He can never give us, as Keats, for example, often does, those marvelous felicities of speech that tease the senses with lovely associations and fill the imagination with a mist of beauty. The remark of Keats, "I look upon fine phrases as a lover," would have been to Wordsworth a sentimental heresy. To him the one virtue of words was sincerity. Himself always sincere and morbidly fearful of anything that should seem merely decorative, he failed to appreciate in other poetry those subtle charms of phrase of which he had himself no mastery. He was so careful not to obscure the form of his thought by any artificialities of poetic diction that he usually prefers a certain homeliness and parsimony. It is this dread of insincerity or sophistication that explains those two famous dicta of the *Preface*—much of which is true—that the language of "humble and rustic" people is best fitted for

poetry, and that "There neither is nor can be any essential difference between the language of poetry and that of prose." Of these two statements—which may be briefly noticed in a later chapter—it may suffice to say here that they sometimes led to results which would have been impossible to a man of nicer esthetic feeling. In his effort to keep to the language of humble folk, now and then he is a little silly when he only means to be simple, and sometimes he is almost funny when he means to be pathetic. The notion that there is no difference in diction between poetry and prose sometimes led him to mistake the one for the other—which is unfortunate. It is true, indeed, that just this high, self-denying austerity of manner gives to Wordsworth's most inspired [redacted] their peculiar power; they render his conc[redacted] its sheer, naked, spiritual truth. But Wordsworth can not maintain the mood of inspiration through a very long poem. Even in his better work he is liable to fall suddenly down on commonplaces with a kind of dull thud. Hardly any other great poet shows more surprising lapses of this kind. And in these uninspired moments his insistence upon simplicity of manner leads him

into a flatness or mere puerility which would be quite impossible to one of surer esthetic feeling.

But perhaps the most fatal deficiency of Wordsworth's genius was his utter lack of humor. He had, at all events through his earlier years, a grave cheerfulness of disposition, so that he was not exactly a dull companion. He must have taken kindly to some humorous people, for he was really fond of Charles Lamb—though, one fancies, with a kind of indulgent tolerance for Lamb's nonsense. But in general he had little patience with what he deemed frivolity; and he himself had no more sense of humor than an antediluvian boulder. "He has to have a joke explained to him," said Horne, "after which he looks uneasy." Such a slight disturbance of the normal gravity of his nature was perhaps the nearest approach he could make to humor. Nor let it be thought that this deficiency while it made Wordsworth a grave and rigid man, had no ill effect upon his poetry. Quite the opposite. It was nearly as disastrous to the poet as to the man. Some poetry, indeed, can well get on without humor —sublime poetry like that of Milton, or ideal poetry like that of Keats; but the poet who finds his theme

in the homely facts of common life can not safely dispense with it. Consider, for example, how inadequate must be the conception of rustic English character framed by one who can make no allowance for its humor. In fact, this inability sometimes makes Wordsworth's depiction of humble folk not quite true. He could not appreciate that sense of humor which often prevents hardships from passing into tragedy or into squalor. In good truth a man of his unalterably serious view of life, misses, in any station, half the alleviations of our human lot. I never read that noble Fourth Book of *The Excursion* in which the Pastor strives in vain by high moral considerations to correct the despondency of the Solitary, without thinking of the Scotchman's brief address to the physician who was treating his wife, "Try her wi' a joke ance, Doctor." I suspect that some of Wordsworth's long and grave admonitions might well be replaced by this simple prescription.

Many of Wordsworth's most artistic and rhetorical lapses are to be accounted for by the same deficiency. When the good man occasionally attempts to be lightsome and fanciful, the resulting pace is something very queer indeed. For example, take

the opening stanzas of the *Prologue* to *Peter Bell*—a poem that had no need of any prologue.

> There's something in a flying horse,
> There's something in a huge balloon;
> But through the clouds I'll never float
> Until I have a little Boat,
> Shaped like a crescent-moon.
>
> And now I *have* a little Boat,
> In shape a very crescent-moon.
> Fast through the clouds my boat can sail;
> But if perchance your faith should fail,
> Look up—and you shall see me soon!
>
> The woods, my Friends, are round you roaring,
> Rocking and roaring like a sea;
> The noise of danger's in your ears,
> And ye have all a thousand fears
> Both for my little Boat and me!
>
> Meanwhile untroubled I admire
> The pointed horns of my canoe;
> And, did not pity touch my breast,
> To see how ye are all distrest,
> Till my ribs ached, I'd laugh at you!

This is very like an archbishop on a rocking-horse. What makes it worse is that these puerilities have no natural connection whatever with the story of the poem, or even with the later parts of the *Prologue*.

A few stanzas further on, and the poet is speaking in his own natural voice:

> Long have I loved what I behold,
> The night that calms, the day that cheers;
> The common growth of mother-earth
> Suffices me—her tears, her mirth,
> Her humblest mirth and tears.
>
> The dragon's wing, the magic ring,
> I shall not covet for my dower,
> If I along that lowly way
> With sympathetic heart may stray,
> And with a soul of power.
>
> These given, what more need I desire
> To stir, to soothe, or elevate?
> What nobler marvels than the mind
> May in life's daily prospect find,
> May find or there create?

Often his stubborn realism, not held in check by any sense of humor, insists upon incidents, situations, or peculiarities meant to be pathetic but really so homely as to provoke a smile, or, worse, so mean as to be repulsive. It is sometimes only humor that restrains us from crossing the fatal line which separates the sublime—or more frequently the pathetic—from the ridiculous. This poem of *Peter Bell* will afford examples. It is the narrative of a pro-

fane and drunken potter who had committed about all the crimes in the calendar, and is suddenly broken down into penitence by seeing the fidelity of a poor ass to its drowned master, and by accidentally overhearing the preaching of a Methodist minister. The story is not intrinsically improbable, and the successive incidents that worked upon the superstition and fear of Peter are vividly painted. But when Peter is cruelly beating the poor brute to make him rise, Wordsworth has to tell us twice over that all was "still and silent far and near."

> Only the ass, with motion dull
> Upon the pivot of his skull
> Turns round his long left ear.

And when at last the poor creature catches a glimpse of the form of his master drawn out of the water, then we have this terribly famous stanza:

> *Now*—like a tempest-shattered bark,
> That overwhelmed and prostrate lies,
> And in a moment to the verge
> Is lifted of a foaming surge—
> Full suddenly the Ass did rise.

We may be sure that if Wordsworth had possessed any sense of humor, such passages as this, with the

maunderings of The Idiot Boy, the infirmities of Simon Lee—

> The more he works, the more
> Do his weak ankles swell—

and a score or more passages in his early poems at which the critics made merry, could never have been written.

CHAPTER V

CHARACTERISTIC MERITS

BUT, grant all these limitations and deficiencies, and the fact still remains that those volumes of verse which Wordsworth published in the first fifteen years of the last century must rank with the noblest poetry of our language. And if it is asked what gives this poetry so high value, we may answer, first of all, its moral quality. No other contemporary poet, no other English poet since Milton, has ministered so well to what is highest and purest in human nature. As Emerson said, "He more than any other man has done justice to the divine in us." If we seek for a statement of the distinguishing value of his poems, we can find none better than that given by Wordsworth himself in his oft-quoted letter to Lady Beaumont: "To teach the young and the gracious of every age *to see, to think,* and *feel,* and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous; this is their office, which I trust

they will faithfully perform long after we are mouldered in our graves." An appeal through our deepest thought and healthiest feeling to the higher spiritual part of our nature—that is the secret of Wordsworth's power. Whatever the ostensible subject, the real theme of all his best verse is some high moral truth which has passed into the study of his imagination.

The occasion which suggests the truth may be of the most plain and homely sort. There is no poet in whose work such simple, often apparently trivial, emotional impulse can suggest such varied and noble thought. But the transient impulse does not often find expression in his lines until it has passed through his imagination, and ripened into truth. The rationale of his poetic process is almost always the same. It is indicated by one of his definitions of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity." He begins with some incident or narrative, no matter how homely, if only the emotion it suggests be healthy and natural; then this emotion is detained in memory and interpreted by imagination, till it slowly shades into reflection and begets some truth of life or character. It is just at this last stage that the mental process is shaped into verse. No-

tice, for example, in this beautiful poem, how the sound of a pleasant sunset salutation blends in the poet's imagination with the quiet beauty of the hour and place, and insensibly suggests the large and tranquil thought of the last couplet.

STEPPING WESTWARD

"What, you are stepping westward?"—"Yea."
—'Twould be a *wildish* destiny,
If we, who thus together roam
In a strange Land, and far from home,
Were in this place the guests of Chance:
Yet who would stop, or fear to advance,
Though home or shelter he had none,
With such a sky to lead him on?

The dewy ground was dark and cold;
Behind, all gloomy to behold;
And stepping westward seemed to be
A kind of *heavenly* destiny:
I liked the greeting; 'twas a sound
Of something without place or bound;
And seemed to give me spiritual right
To travel through that region bright.

The voice was soft, and she who spake
Was walking by her native lake:
The salutation had to me
The very sound of courtesy:
Its power was felt; and while my eye
Was fixed upon the glowing Sky,

> The echo of the voice enwrought
> A human sweetness with the thought
> Of travelling through the world that lay
> Before me in my endless way.

All Wordsworth's best poetry is in the mood of serious reflection. He is not coldly didactic—at all events not in his earlier work—but he is never prodigal of emotion. He had a dislike of that indulgence of feeling which so easily degenerates into a sentimental and enfeebling luxury. As he says in the *Story of Margaret:*

> It were a wantonness, and would deserve
> Some reproof, if we were men whose hearts
> Could hold vain dalliance with the misery
> Even of the dead, contented thence to draw
> A momentary pleasure . . .
> . . . barren of all future good.

It is characteristic of the sanity and self-control of his nature that he will not give himself up to passionate sympathies. You never get in his verse the lyrical cry of unrestrained emotion. The sinking grief, the regrets, the passionate longing—these things he will not put into his poetry until they have passed through the silent study of his imagination and yielded up some lessons of human life. Thus the deepest charm even of his pathetic poems is not

one of feeling but of thought, though of "those thoughts that stir about the heart." His sympathy for sorrow shades into the soothing and strengthening assurance that sorrows only prove the power of love to make all things endurable, that they may quicken our sense of human kinship, thrust us upon our deep-lying faith, and thus issue in moral calm and settled will. There is in all his poetry a certain calm hopefulness. He has the placid strength of healthy sensibilities and tranquil reflection. Yet he has none of the easy optimism of ignorance or the selfish optimism which turns resolutely away from the hardships and evil of human life. Nor can I quite agree with Mr. Arnold's lines:

> The cloud of mortal destiny
> Others will front it fearlessly,—
> But who, like him, will *put it by?*

He did not "put by" the clouds that shadow our lot; but he would not be darkened or depressed by them. In the face of all the burden and the mystery of this unintelligible world, he preserves a high serenity of faith. To read him aright is to catch a new sense of

> Central peace subsisting at the heart
> Of endless agitation.

Wordsworth's most poetic mood was not one of emotional exaltation or excitement, but rather one of quiet, determined contemplation. He always had a half-formed theory that the highest knowledge comes not from conscious effort, but from calm receptiveness of soul.

> I deem that there are powers
> Which of themselves our minds impress;
> That we can feed these minds of ours
> In a wise passiveness.

All readers of Wordsworth will remember how often this is referred to:

> The heart that watches and receives.
>
> That inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude
>
> The harvest of a quiet eye
> That broods and sleeps on his own heart
>
> When we are laid asleep in body
> And become a living soul.

Scores of similar passages may be cited as expressions of the state of thought and feeling out of which came his most genuinely inspired work. This is not a mood of inertness; it is not so much a "wise

passiveness," as an openness of soul. It is not reverie, the contemplation of casual thoughts that drift over the mind like passing clouds at every breath of fancy. Say rather it is a mood of intuition in which the imagination is most sensitive and wakeful. The philosophers may not agree upon any definition for that word imagination, since it is commonly used to designate not one process but several. In Wordsworth's usage it does not mean the power to create; of pure creative imagination like that in *The Ancient Mariner* Wordsworth had extremely little. It is rather the faculty by which we *interpret* our experiences; the gift to see beauty or truth in what to another's eyes might be an ordinary incident; to read high truths in homely lives. Now very few poets have ever surpassed Wordsworth in this form of the imagination. He keeps his attention steadily fixed upon an object until he discovers all its most poetic meanings. He says in some noteworthy lines of *The Recluse:*

> On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life,
> Musing in solitude, I oft perceive
> Fair trains of imagery before me rise,
> Accompanied by feelings of delight
> Pure, or with no unpleasing sadness mixed.

He has also most remarkable power to draw these imaginative delights from the humblest sources. Especially is he quick to perceive spiritual relationship or suggestion, and the most familiar object can "disturb him with the joy of elevated thought." Sometimes his imagination sees in a simple object or incident some subtle spiritual beauty, too ethereal to be described, and then fixes it in a picture to haunt the memory forever. Thus he hears a Scottish lass singing among the reapers in the wild Highland country, and the poem he made of it is one of the loveliest in the world:

THE HIGHLAND REAPER

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:

A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?—
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;—
I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

In some of these stanzas Wordsworth catches an unconscious elusive grace, the charm of perfect simplicity with perfect music, such as he very seldom attains.

The very highest value of such an interpretative imagination as this consists in the absolute truth of its deliverances. Wordsworth does not aim to heighten or embellish. His imagination seems not

colored by his own sentiments or prepossessions. It simply aims to disclose to our vision intrinsic truth or beauty. It "sees into the life of things." Wordsworth paints no fictitious pictures, invents no charm; his verse seems only to reveal in the common face of nature and the lives of ordinary men what we all might see, but have not. Similarly the moral truths of which his poetry is full seem equally evident and certain. They are not matters of argument and probability, but elemental and intuitive. When, as often happens in his later work, his imagination fails him, and he drops to the level of prosaic discussion, economic, religious, social, then we get mere dull opinions which have no commanding authority; but scattered through his best work are truths of the imagination as august and positive as if they had indeed

Out of the heart of nature rolled.

It is this serene self-confidence of Wordsworth that gives a marked individual quality to all his work. It all bears the stamp of his personality. When he is at his best, he is a seer; when he is at his worst he is a mere preacher, and often sufficiently prosy; but best or worst, every line is Will-

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iam Wordsworth. He lived alone, communing with nature and his own spirit; observing men within his narrow circle of acquaintance, but not mingling with them. Solitude* of some sort was necessary for him. His imagination could not make itself heard among the idle noises of common life. He composed his poetry while walking alone, on the upper road from Grasmere to Rydal, or in the Easedale valley, or on some of the other less frequented paths about his home; "booing about," as his neighbors called it, repeating his verses audibly to himself as they took shape in his mind. None of his family ventured to disturb these silent moods of inspiration; but even in less inspired hours, by the fireside in his own cottage, he was still a silent man. As he says:

> I am not one who much or oft delights
> To season my fireside with personal talk—
> Of friends who live within an easy walk,
> Or neighbors, daily, weekly in my sight;
> And for my chance-acquaintance, ladies bright,
> Sons, mothers, maidens withering on the stalk,
> These all wear out of me, like Forms with chalk
> Painted on rich men's floors, for one feast-night,

* It is interesting to note that in the new Concordance to Wordsworth's poetry the words *solitary* and *solitude* occur more than two hundred times.

Better than such discourse doth silence, long,
Long, barren silence, square with my desire;
To sit without emotion, hope, or aim,
By my half-kitchen and half-parlour fire,
And listen to the flapping of the flame,
Or kettle whispering its faint undersong.

Personal Talk.

Better still, as giving in brief compass the characteristic features of the man, is the portrait he has drawn of himself in *A Poet's Epitaph.*

A POET'S EPITAPH

Art thou a Statist in the van
  Of public conflicts trained and bred?
—First learn to love one living man;
  Then may'st thou think upon the dead.

A Lawyer art thou?—draw not nigh!
  Go, carry to some fitter place
The keenness of that practised eye,
  The hardness of that sallow face.

Art thou a Man of purple cheer?
  A rosy Man, right plump to see?
Approach; yet, Doctor, not too near,
  This grave no cushion is for thee.

Or art thou one of gallant pride,
  A Soldier and no man of chaff?
Welcome!—but lay thy sword aside,
  And lean upon a peasant's staff.

Physician art thou? one, all eyes,
  Philosopher!—a fingering slave,
One that would peep and botanize
  Upon his mother's grave?

Wrapt closely in thy sensual fleece,
  O turn aside,—and take, I pray,
That he below may rest in peace,
  Thy ever-dwindling soul, away!

A Moralist perchance appears;
  Led, Heaven knows how! to this poor sod:
And he has neither eyes nor ears;
  Himself his world, and his own God;

One to whose smooth-rubbed soul can cling
  Nor form, nor feeling, great or small;
A reasoning, self-sufficing thing,
  An intellectual All-in-all!

Shut close the door; press down the latch;
  Sleep in thy intellectual crust;
Nor lose ten tickings of thy watch
  Near this unprofitable dust.

But who is He, with modest looks,
  And clad in homely russet brown?
He murmurs near the running brooks
  A music sweeter than their own.

He is retired as noontide dew,
  Or fountain in a noon-day grove;
And you must love him, ere to you
  He will seem worthy of your love.

The outward shows of sky and earth
  Of hill and valley he has viewed:
And impulses of deeper birth
  Have come to him in solitude.

In common things that round us lie
  Some random truths he can impart,—
The harvest of a quiet eye
  That broods and sleeps on his own heart.

But he is weak; both Man and Boy,
  Hath been an idler in the land;
Contented if he might enjoy
  The things which others understand.

—Come hither in thy hour of strength;
  Come, weak as is a breaking wave!
Here stretch thy body at full length;
  Or build thy house upon this grave.

Doubtless this removed and solitary temper gives to much of Wordsworth's work unusual power. His most inspired utterances have the high calm, the settled strength of his own hills. But, on the other hand, it must be admitted that such lofty aloofness does not make the personality of the poet engaging. He is not a genial man. He will not unbend. He can not, like Chaucer, make us "of his company anon." It is doubtful whether his readers ever feel a sense of every-day companionship with him. It

is true that familiarity with his poetry gradually inspires a regard such as none of his contemporaries can inspire, but—

> You must love him, ere to you
> He will seem worthy of your love.

Nay, even after long acquaintance, few readers would venture to designate their regard by so intimate a term. He can never be a popular poet. Yet it is the best proof of the vital and permanent power of his poetry that he has won so high a place in our literature without any of those personal qualities which have made the names of Burns and Goldsmith, for example, household words among English-speaking people.

This absolute sincerity and this truth to the deepest and most abiding things in human nature make the power of Wordsworth's poetry, when once we have felt it, so enduring and so independent of changing mood and circumstance. He has no voice for the ardor and passion of youth, he can shed no romantic glamour over the hard facts of our lot; but he teaches us nothing we must unlearn, touches no chord in our souls that soon grows silent. The colors of romance will fade, the pulse of passion

will beat more temperately as our years pass on to the broader light of noon and the gray of evening; but the sympathy for our common human lot, the "soothing thoughts that spring out of human suffering," the affection that is rich in memories, the joy in the common face of nature and the shows of earth and sky—these only grow more precious with the mellowing years; and these are the riches of Wordsworth's poetry. Nay, even more is true. Our seasons of sorrow that make beauty and romance seem idle and intruding things, only give new sanctity to the best verse of Wordsworth. As Sir Leslie Stephen says, "Other poetry becomes trifling when we make our passages through the Valley of the Shadow of Death; Wordsworth's alone retains its power."

In a line already quoted, Wordsworth indicates the three subjects under which nearly all his poems may be grouped.

> On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life, musing.

By "Man" we may understand Wordsworth to mean the peculiarities and incidents in the lives of individual men, especially men of humble station; by "Human Life," the general life of men, either in

its essential character or its varied relations, social, political, religious. The following chapters will discuss somewhat more fully his treatment of these three subjects: Humble and Rustic Life, Nature, His Philosophy of Life.

CHAPTER VI

HUMBLE AND RUSTIC LIFE—POETIC DICTION

IT will be remembered that in planning the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads,* the two poets agreed that Coleridge should "devote his endeavors to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic," while Wordsworth was to choose such characters and incidents as may be found in almost every village. In accordance with this agreement, all of Wordsworth's contributions to the volume, with the one notable exception of the *Lines Above Tintern Abbey,* were on common or humble themes. Up to this time he does not seem to have considered the lives of humble folk an inviting subject for poetry. Neither in *An Evening Walk* nor in the *Descriptive Sketches* does he give more than incidental notice to persons; and when they are mentioned they are introduced chiefly to give more animation to his narrative. He says himself in *The Prelude* that up to his twenty-second year man was

entirely subordinate to nature in his thought. In his Hawkshead days though "Shepherds were the men that pleased me most," they pleased him not for their own sake, but because they seemed almost identified with the forms of Nature. The mountain shepherd, seen against the sky on a distant hillside, was

> A solitary object and sublime,
> . . . and serenest solitude
> Had more commanding looks when he was there.

A variety of reasons doubtless influenced him, more or less consciously in this preference. His own failure in *The Borderers* had probably convinced him of his inability in the portrayal of violent passions or romantic adventure. The disappointment of his revolutionary hopes had quickened rather than depressed his human sympathies; if he had less confidence in any wide revolutionary movements, he had a warmer feeling for the individual man. Tired of all high speech about the rights of man, he based his hope of a better society upon the character of plain men and women. The homely sense of duty, the simple reverence for religion, the neighborly sympathies, the fireside virtues of the home, it was to these, he believed, we must look for all im-

provement in social and political conditions. It was natural that he should think to find in them the fittest themes of poetry.

Moreover, in the choice of such homely themes he was in harmony with the tendency of his age. For half a century the temper of democracy had been gaining ground in English literature; it was becoming evident that the people were to have their innings. Thomson, Goldsmith, Gray, Cowper, had all sung

> The short and simple annals of the poor.

All over Europe, indeed, Rousseau had made it a fashion to idealize humble life. The "swain" had become one of the picturesque conventions of artificial poetry. But in this verse there was little sincerity. The poets really knew nothing of the life of the humble classes. They regarded it with a superior air of benevolence, an easy and patronizing grace; they never saw its hard and bleak details. It was not in this temper that Wordsworth was to write of Simon Lee or Michael or Margaret.

Two poets, however, before Wordsworth began his work, had already depicted the life of the poor more truthfully. In Robert Burns the peasant class,

for the first and only time, found a great poet of its own. There never had been, there may never be again, such a genuine poet of the people. Burns knew both the outward circumstance and the inner life of the Scottish peasantry. He exemplifies most of their virtues and most of their faults; he really stands among them while he sings. The other poet who tried to tell the truth about poor folk was George Crabbe. His career beginning a little earlier, ran parallel with Wordsworth's for a quarter century; his first poem was written in 1781, his last in 1819. Protesting against the sham idealism of previous poets, Crabbe depicts the condition of the Norfolkshire peasantry and villagers with a pitiless realism.

> I paint the cot
> As Truth will paint it and as Bards will not.

Writing like a parish priest or a charity visitor, he dwells with indignant pity upon the external circumstances of the poor, but too often overlooks almost entirely the affections, the endurance, the humor, which, as Burns shows, may make the narrowest life poetical. But neither of these poets probably had much influence upon Wordsworth. Crabbe's verse he did not much admire; he thought

it cheerless and without imagination—as it is. To Burns, indeed he confessed indebtedness in the familiar lines

> Whose light I hailed when first it shone
> And taught my youth
> How verse may build a princely throne
> On humble truth.

And in later years he expressed hearty admiration for the writings of Burns, and generous apology for his failings. But there is no evidence, I think, besides these lines of any such early familiarity with the poetry of Burns as would explain his own choice of themes. Moreover, Wordsworth's attitude toward "humble and rustic life" was quite different from that of Burns.

When the *Lyrical Ballads* were derided as trivial and vulgar, Wordsworth wrote for the second edition that famous *Preface* which contains his own explanation and defense both of his subjects and his manner. The most important passage of this apology may be quoted here:

"The principal object, then, proposed in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language

really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of the imagination whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and further and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature, chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Humble and rustic life was usually chosen because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from these elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified, indeed, from what appears to be its real defects,

from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions."

It would not be difficult to show that hardly a single one of these statements by which Wordsworth justifies his choice of humble and rustic life can be accepted as true without serious qualification. It is probably not true that the essential passions of the heart best "attain their maturity" among plain and rustic folk; it can hardly be true that "the elementary feelings are more accurately contemplated" by such people; it is not clear that in any intelligible sense, the passions of such men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The fact is that such of Wordsworth's statements as are true are little more than truisms. Humble and rustic people have few general ideas, and hence simpler language. Their powers of reflection and comparison have usually not been cultivated or dis-

ciplined, and thus their ideas "co-exist in a state of greater simplicity." They are less under the restraints of social convention and so speak out more bluntly, though by no means more clearly or more forcibly. Hodge has never learned the use of language to conceal his thoughts, nor of manners to disguise his feelings. It is probably true that the simpler and cruder thoughts and feelings may be more readily discernible in men and women who live in a narrow circle of acquaintance and have few intellectual interests. But, it may be urged, is it not impossible to make great poetry out of the lives of such people. Their range of feelings is limited; they can have little elevation and little subtlety of thought, little comprehension of the varied possibilities of knowledge, or power, or joy in human life. Why, then, said Wordsworth's critics, should we read poetry of which such persons are the subjects? With all the wealth of beauty and truth in English literature at our command; with yet untraveled regions of romance in which the imagination may expatiate, with Hamlet and Othello, Juliet and Rosalind for the companions of our solitude, why should we interest ourselves in Peter Bell or the Mad Mother or Michael simply because in them

their essential feelings and their manners may be "more easily comprehended"?

But all such criticism is beside the mark. Jeffrey was not far wrong in his statement that Crabbe "exhibits the common people pretty much as they are, and as they must appear to every one who will take the trouble of examining into their condition." Exactly, so he did. Crabbe represents common people as they *are* to themselves, and as they appear to any one who examines only their outward "condition." But Wordsworth never attempted to exhibit the life of any of the lower classes in its narrowness and crudity, after the manner of our modern realists, either for our curiosity or our pity. He knew well enough that a detailed study of any such character would disclose its shallowness and aridity. He does not ask us to become acquainted with Betty Foy or even with Michael as we are acquainted with Cleopatra or Hamlet. Wordsworth himself was not acquainted with them. There is no evidence that he ever was on such familiar terms even with his plain neighbors of the Lake District as to have any intimate knowledge of their lives. Quite the contrary. It is clear from the testimony of those of the generation just past who knew his

face and his daily ways, that the plain folk whom he so often put into his poetry, although they always respected him, never got very near him. Canon Rawnsley reports some interesting conversations with the Westmoreland peasantry who still remembered the poet. "Why," said one of them, "Wordsworth never said much to folk; quite different from li'le Hartley (Coleridge) as knawed the insides of cottages for miles round, and was welcome in 'em all." "Do you think," I asked, "that he had any friends among the shepherds?" "Naay, naay, he cared nowt about folk, nor sheep, nor dogs—his hobby was potry."

The old lady now caretaker of Dove Cottage, who knew the poet in his later years, once said to the present writer, "He was a vera good man, was Mr. Wudsworth, but he would never speak to you unless you spoke to him first."

In fact, Mr. Wordsworth's poetry of humble and rustic life never tells us much about that life—for the very good reason that he did not know very much about it himself. It is not the life of the shepherd or peasant, but Wordsworth's reflection upon some particular incident or special phase of that life, which, in almost every case, forms the theme of his

poem. It is really of his own thoughts, not those of the peasant, that he is writing. He can not, like Burns, speak from out the very heart of rustic experience. If we carefully read the statements of the paragraph quoted from the *Preface,* we shall see that it is only the universal truths of human nature, which he calls the "essential passions" and "elementary feelings" that really command his interest; and he turns to "humble and rustic life" because there such truths may, so to speak, be shown in isolation. A single dominant emotion or homely virtue stands out boldly from a narrow and commonplace experience; one simple incident breaking the dull monotony of a man's days may suddenly reveal the central motive or the deepest pathos of his life.

In some of his earlier poems Wordsworth certainly carried too far this insistence upon homeliness. Endeavoring to heighten the contrast between the humble circumstances and the impressive teachings of his poems, he now and then introduced into them persons and incidents sure to be accounted by most readers repulsive or trivial. *The Idiot Boy* is a case in point. The story of the poem, in bald prose, is simply this: Two old women, Betty Foy and Susan Gale, live together remote from town.

When Susan is taken suddenly ill at nightfall, Betty, who does not dare to leave her alone, is forced to send her idiot son, on horseback, to fetch a doctor. The boy rides away in witless glee, but doesn't return; and Betty in agony of fear, leaves Susan to go in search for him. After wandering about all night she finds him in a meadow, the pony grazing quietly and the idiot boy chattering happily in the moonlight and wondering at the owls. Wordsworth leaves us in no doubt as to the complete idiocy of the boy, but dwells with a kind of glee upon "the noise he loves to make," and all the other marks of mental vacancy. The real subject of the poem we must suppose is maternal affection. Wordsworth is trying to put an extreme case; to show parental love in its primitive isolated form, in circumstances which would put it to a supreme test. He himself averred in later years that he had taken great pleasure in the composition of the poem, and never could quite be brought to see any rational objections to it. The ridicule cast upon it he attributed to an unreasoning prejudice against the mere word "idiot."

Similarly, Peter Bell, the drunken potter who

beats the poor ass so cruelly, and shivering Harry Gill, whose

> Teeth they chatter, chatter, chatter still,

will probably be voted by most readers not merely humble, but rather unpleasant persons. And as for Alice Fell, who weeps when her cloak is torn on the muddy coach wheel and is a "proud creature" when she is given a new one; or "Little Edward" who when unwisely importuned by his father to give a reason for his preference for Kilve over Liswyn farm, at last

> . . . did his lips unlock,
> And thus to me he made reply,
> "At Kilve there was no weathercock,
> And that's the reason why"—

it is to be feared that the average reader will see in the story of these children little more than pretty childishness passing into puerility.

But in not more than about half a dozen instances does Wordsworth's devotion to his theory lay him open to such criticism. The most of his poems on humble themes make a genuine and healthy appeal to our sympathies. Sometimes a casual incident,

hardly to be noticed in any but the simplest life, will touch for an instant the chords of deepest feeling. When the old huntsman pauses for a moment at his cottage door before he joins the hunt, Wordsworth says simply,

> Perhaps to himself at that moment he said
> "*The key I must take,* for my Ellen is dead";
> But of this to me not a word did he speak,
> And he went to the chase with a tear on his cheek.

More often the real motive of the poem is some reflection on human life suggested to the poet by a chance meeting or a word of friendly talk. Thus in the most familiar of the *Matthew* poems it is the undertone of lonely sadness even in a cheerful old age:

THE FOUNTAIN

A CONVERSATION

We talked with open heart, and tongue
  Affectionate and true,
A pair of friends, though I was young,
  And Matthew seventy-two.

We lay beneath a spreading oak,
  Beside a mossy seat;
And from the turf a fountain broke,
  And gurgled at our feet.

"Now, Matthew!" said I, "let us match
  This water's pleasant tune
With some old border-song, or catch
  That suits a summer's noon;

"Or of the church-clock and the chimes
  Sing here beneath the shade,
That half-mad thing of witty rhymes
  Which you last April made!"

In silence Matthew lay, and eyed
  The spring beneath the tree;
And thus the dear old Man replied,
  The grey-haired man of glee:

"Down to the vale the water steers,
  How merrily it goes
'Twill murmur on a thousand years
  And flow as now it flows.

"And here on this delightful day,
  I cannot choose but think
How oft, a vigorous man, I lay
  Beside the Fountain's brink.

"My eyes are dimmed with childish tears
  My heart is idly stirred,
For the same sound is in my ears,
  Which in those days I heard.

"Thus fares it still in our decay;
  And yet the wiser mind
Mourns less for what age takes away
  Than what it leaves behind.

"The blackbird amid leafy trees,
The lark above the hill,
Let loose their carols when they please,
Are quiet when they will.

"With Nature never do *they* wage
A foolish strife; they see
A happy youth, and their old age
Is beautiful and free:

"But we are pressed by heavy laws;
And often, glad no more,
We wear a face of joy, because
We have been glad of yore.

"If there be one who need bemoan
His kindred laid in earth,
The household hearts that were his own;
It is the man of mirth.

"My days, my Friend, are almost gone,
My life has been approved,
And many love me: but by none
Am I enough beloved."

"Now both himself and me he wrongs,
The man who thus complains!
I live and sing my idle songs
Upon these happy plains;

"And, Matthew, for thy children dead
I'll be a son to thee!"
At this he grasped my hand, and said,
"Alas! that cannot be."

We rose up from the fountain-side;
And down the smooth descent
Of the green sheep-track did we glide;
And through the wood we went;

And, ere we came to Leonard's rock,
He sang those witty rhymes
About the crazy old church-clock,
And the bewildered chimes.

In Simon Lee it is the pathos of effusive gratitude in helpless age,

The tears into his eyes were brought
And thanks and praises seemed to run
So fast out of his heart, I thought
They never would have done.
I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds
With coldness still returning;
Alas! the gratitude of men
Hath oftener left me mourning.

This power to find high suggestion in humble circumstance is nowhere better shown than in the poem Wordsworth called *Resolution and Independence,* or *The Leech Gatherer.* It is only the story of his accidental meeting with a feeble old man who was poking about for leeches in the muddy pools; yet the poem Wordsworth made of it will take rank with the noblest verse of the century, and the old beggar who gathered the leeches is one of the au-

gust figures in the gallery of our imagination. The poem is worth quoting entire, as an example not only of Wordsworth's art, but of the way in which the common incidents of his daily life were handled by his imagination. For we know it was a record of actual experience. Nothing in it is pure invention. Dorothy in her Journal describes in detail the appearance and speech of the old man as she and William met him one day in September of 1800. It is probable, also, that Wordsworth may have been, at that time, in such dejection as he describes in the early part of the poem. He had no profession save that of poet, and little prospect of success in that. The first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* had been received with indifference or contempt; the second edition was not yet issued. But this mood of despondency is described at length simply to make more striking the apparition of the Leech Gatherer. Just as he is entirely sunk in morbid brooding,—

> Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven
> I saw a Man before me unawares;
> The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs.

To his startled imagination there seemed something mysterious, supernatural, about this strange figure that rises, silent and solitary, as if trans-

figured into the solemn spirit of the place, the embodiment of the gaunt and lonely moorland. Coleridge pronounced the imagery by which the old man is described too large for the subject; but Wordsworth was right. No imagery could be too large or solemn to record the impression made by such an august shape. The grave and stately words in which he describes his homely occupation sound like words in a dream. And when at last by further conversation he has proved that he is no vision, this bent and decrepit old man still remains in the poet's memory, almost like one of the permanent forms of nature, an image of calm strength and independence. The whole poem is one of the best examples of Wordsworth's sheer imaginative power in dealing with the humblest matters.

RESOLUTION AND INDEPENDENCE

I

There was a roaring in the wind all night;
The rain came heavily and fell in floods;
But now the sun is rising calm and bright;
The birds are singing in the distant woods;
Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;
The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;
And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.

II

All things that love the sun are out of doors;
The sky rejoices in the morning's birth;
The grass is bright with rain-drops;—on the moors
The hare is running races in her mirth;
And with her feet she from the plashy earth
Raises a mist; that, glittering in the sun,
Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run.

III

I was a Traveller then upon the moor;
I saw the hare that raced about with joy;
I heard the woods and distant waters roar;
Or heard them not, as happy as a boy:
The pleasant season did my heart employ:
My old remembrances went from me wholly;
And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.

IV

But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might
Of joy in minds that can no farther go,
As high as we have mounted in delight
In our dejection do we sink as low;
To me that morning did it happen so;
And fears and fancies thick upon me came;
Dim sadness—and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor
could name.

V

I heard the sky-lark warbling in the sky;
And I bethought me of the playful hare:
Even such a happy Child of earth am I;

Even as these blissful creatures do I fare;
Far from the world I walk, and from all care;
But there may come another day to me—
Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty.

VI

My whole life I have lived in pleasant thought,
As if life's business were a summer mood;
As if all needful things would come unsought
To genial faith, still rich in genial good;
But how can He expect that others should
Build for him, sow for him, and at his call
Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all?

VII

I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous Boy,
The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride;
Of Him who walked in glory and in joy
Following his plough, along the mountain-side:
By our own spirits are we deified:
We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.

VIII

Now, whether it were by peculiar grace,
A leading from above, a something given,
Yet it befell that, in this lonely place,
When I with these untoward thoughts had striven,
Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven
I saw a Man before me unawares:
The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs.

IX

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couched on the bald top of an eminence;
Wonder to all who do the same espy,
By what means it could thither come, and whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposeth, there to sun itself;

X

Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead,
Nor all asleep—in his extreme old age:
His body was bent double, feet and head
Coming together in life's pilgrimage;
As if some dire constraint of pain, or rage
Of sickness felt by him in times long past,
A more than human weight upon his frame had cast.

XI

Himself he propped, limbs, body, and pale face,
Upon a long grey staff of shaven wood:
And, still as I drew near with gentle pace,
Upon the margin of that moorish flood
Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood,
That heareth not the loud winds when they call;
And moveth all together, if it move at all.

XII

At length, himself unsettling, he the pond
Stirred with his staff, and fixedly did look
Upon the muddy water, which he conned,

As if he had been reading in a book:
And now a stranger's privilege I took;
And, drawing to his side, to him did say,
"This morning gives us promise of a glorious day."

XIII

A gentle answer did the old Man make,
In courteous speech which forth he slowly drew:
And him with further words I thus bespake,
"What occupation do you there pursue?
This is a lonesome place for one like you."
Ere he replied, a flash of mild surprise
Broke from the sable orbs of his yet-vivid eyes.

XIV

His words came feebly, from a feeble chest,
But each in solemn order followed each,
With something of a lofty utterance drest—
Choice word and measured phrase, above the reach
Of ordinary men; a stately speech;
Such as grave Livers do in Scotland use,
Religious men, who give to God and man their dues.

XV

He told, that to these waters he had come
To gather leeches, being old and poor:
Employment hazardous and wearisome!
And he had many hardships to endure:
From pond to pond he roamed, from moor to moor;
Housing, with God's good help, by choice or chance;
And in this way he gained an honest maintenance.

XVI

The old Man still stood talking by my side;
But now his voice to me was like a stream
Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;
And the whole body of the Man did seem
Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
Or like a man from some far region sent,
To give me human strength, by apt admonishment.

XVII

My former thoughts returned: the fear that kills;
And hope that is unwilling to be fed;
Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills;
And mighty Poets in their misery dead.
—Perplexed, and longing to be comforted,
My question eagerly did I renew,
"How is it that you live, and what is it you do?"

XVIII

He with a smile did then his words repeat;
And said that, gathering leeches, far and wide
He travelled; stirring thus about his feet
The waters of the pools where they abide.
"Once I could meet with them on every side;
But they have dwindled long by slow decay;
Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may."

XIX

While he was talking thus, the lonely place,
The old Man's shape, and speech—all troubled me:
In my mind's eye I seemed to see him pace

About the weary moors continually,
Wandering about alone and silently.
While I these thoughts within myself pursued,
He, having made a pause, the same discourse renewed.

XX

And soon with this he other matter blended,
Cheerfully uttered, with demeanour kind,
But stately in the main; and, when he ended,
I could have laughed myself to scorn to find
In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.
"God," said I, "be my help and stay secure;
I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!"

In some of his longer poems from humble life, like *Margaret,* or *The Brothers,* or *Michael,* Wordsworth does not merely relate an incident, but tells the story of a lifetime. Yet here his object is the same. He is not intent upon merely esthetic effect. He does not aim primarily to stir our emotions by a pathetic narrative. He wishes, rather, to exhibit some of the fundamental forces of character, the affections, the faith, the endurance that support and uplift our lives. Any one who wishes to see Wordsworth at his best should read *Michael.* The story is of the simplest. It can be put into a single sentence. A plain mountain shepherd, who when eighty-four years of age was forced by hard poverty to

send the only son of his old age away to the city, and who lived on among his hills in stern and silent loneliness years after his boy had gone to the bad. That is all. But this story, heard in his boyhood, had lingered in the heart of Wordsworth till it had come to seem a symbol of the deep personal affections, the universal sorrows of our human lot. In no one of his poems did he find a more congenial theme. The character of Michael himself will illustrate the dignity the life of ordinary man takes on, for Wordsworth's imagination, when it is "incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." The essential tragedy of Michael's life might have been enacted in a flat and fertile country, or even in a crowded town; but it would not then have appealed to Wordsworth's imagination. In such circumstances, Wordsworth would have said, Michael would have probably been a very different man. But among the hills of the Lake Country he

> . . . had learned the meaning of all winds,
> Of blasts of every tone; and often times
> When others heeded not, He heard the South
> Make subterraneous music, like the noise
> Of bagpipers on distant Highland hills.

And whatever we may think of some of Words-

worth's statements as to poetic diction, here at all events he may rightly insist upon absolute simplicity as the only possible form of speech. He called the poem *A Pastoral,* as if in protest against all the pretty artificialities that had gone under that name; but here is no idle decoration, no graceful unreality. He will admit no heightening of phrase, not a syllable that might seem merely rhetorical. He has told the story with an austere sincerity, a high patriarchal simplicity of manner that reminds us of the best passages of the Scripture narrative.

Wordsworth makes no attempt to produce tragic effect by dwelling upon the details of the son's ruin, or on the grief of his father. He would have us feel rather the unchanging affection, the strength of soul that can endure in silence. He says simply:

MICHAEL

A PASTORAL POEM

If from the public way you turn your steps
Up the tumultuous brook of Greenhead Ghyll,
You will suppose that with an upright path
Your feet must struggle; in such bold ascent
The pastoral mountains front you, face to face.
But, courage! for around that boisterous brook
The mountains have all opened out themselves,
And made a hidden valley of their own.

No habitation can be seen; but they
Who journey thither find themselves alone
With a few sheep, with rocks and stones, and kites
That overhead are sailing in the sky.
It is in truth an utter solitude;
Nor should I have made mention of this Dell
But for one object which you might pass by,
Might see and notice not. Beside the brook
Appears a straggling heap of unhewn stones!
And to that simple object appertains
A story—unenriched with strange events,
Yet not unfit, I deem, for the fireside,
Or for the summer shade. It was the first
Of those domestic tales that spake to me
Of shepherds, dwellers in the valleys, men
Whom I already loved; not verily
For their own sakes, but for the fields and hills
Where was their occupation and abode.
And hence this Tale, while I was yet a Boy
Careless of books, yet having felt the power
Of Nature, by the gentle agency
Of natural objects, led me on to feel
For passions that were not my own, and think
(At random and imperfectly indeed)
On man, the heart of man, and human life.
Therefore, although it be a history
Homely and rude, I will relate the same
For the delight of a few natural hearts;
And, with yet fonder feeling, for the sake
Of youthful Poets, who among these hills
Will be my second self when I am gone.

Upon the forest-side in Grasmere Vale
There dwelt a Shepherd, Michael was his name;
An old man, stout of heart, and strong of limb.

His bodily frame had been from youth to age
Of an unusual strength: his mind was keen,
Intense, and frugal, apt for all affairs,
And in his shepherd's calling he was prompt
And watchful more than ordinary men.
Hence had he learned the meaning of all winds,
Of blasts of every tone; and oftentimes,
When others heeded not, He heard the South
Make subterraneous music, like the noise
Of bagpipers on distant Highland hills.
The Shepherd, at such warning, of his flock
Bethought him, and he to himself would say,
"The winds are now devising work for me!"
And, truly, at all times, the storm, that drives
The traveller to a shelter, summoned him
Up to the mountains: he had been alone
Amid the heart of many thousand mists,
That came to him, and left him, on the heights.
So lived he till his eightieth year was past.
And grossly that man errs, who should suppose
That the green valleys, and the streams and rocks,
Were things indifferent to the Shepherd's thoughts.
Fields, where with cheerful spirits he had breathed
The common air; hills, which with vigorous step
He had so often climbed; which had impressed
So many incidents upon his mind
Of hardship, skill or courage, joy or fear;
Which, like a book, preserved the memory
Of the dumb animals, whom he had saved,
Had fed or sheltered, linking to such acts
The certainty of honourable gain;
Those fields, those hills—what could they less? had laid
Strong hold on his affections, were to him
A pleasurable feeling of blind love,

The pleasure which there is in life itself.
His days had not been passed in singleness.
His Helpmate was a comely matron, old—
Though younger than himself full twenty years.
She was a woman of a stirring life,
Whose heart was in her house: two wheels she had
Of antique form; this large, for spinning wool;
That small, for flax; and if one wheel had rest
It was because the other was at work.
The Pair had but one inmate in their house,
An only Child, who had been born to them
When Michael, telling o'er his years, began
To deem that he was old,—in shepherd's phrase,
With one foot in the grave. This only Son,
With two brave sheep-dogs tried in many a storm,
The one of an inestimable worth,
Made all their household. I may truly say,
That they were as a proverb in the vale
For endless industry. When day was gone,
And from their occupations out of doors
The Son and Father were come home, even then,
Their labour did not cease; unless when all
Turned to the cleanly supper-board, and there,
Each with a mess of pottage and skimmed milk,
Sat round the basket piled with oaten cakes,
And their plain home-made cheese. Yet when the meal
Was ended, Luke (for so the Son was named)
And his old Father both betook themselves
To such convenient work as might employ
Their hands by the fireside; perhaps to card
Wool for the Housewife's spindle, or repair
Some injury done to sickle, flail, or scythe,
Or other implement of house or field.
Down from the ceiling, by the chimney's edge,

That in our ancient uncouth country style
With huge and black projection overbrowed
Large space beneath, as duly as the light
Of day grew dim the Housewife hung a lamp;
An aged utensil, which had performed
Service beyond all others of its kind.
Early at evening did it burn—and late,
Surviving comrade of uncounted hours,
Which, going by from year to year, had found,
And left, the couple neither gay perhaps
Nor cheerful, yet with objects and with hopes,
Living a life of eager industry.
And now, when Luke had reached his eighteenth year,
There by the light of this old lamp they sate,
Father and Son, while far into the night
The Housewife plied her own peculiar work,
Making the cottage through the silent hours
Murmur as with the sound of summer flies.
This light was famous in its neighbourhood,
And was a public symbol of the life
That thrifty Pair had lived. For, as it chanced,
Their cottage on a plot of rising ground
Stood single, with large prospect, north and south,
High into Easedale, up to Dummail-Raise,
And westward to the village near the lake;
And from this constant light, so regular
And so far seen, the House itself, by all
Who dwelt within the limits of the vale,
Both old and young, was named THE EVENING STAR.
  Thus living on through such a length of years,
The Shepherd, if he loved himself, must needs
Have loved his Helpmate; but to Michael's heart
This son of his old age was yet more dear—
Less from instinctive tenderness, the same

Fond spirit that blindly works in the blood of all—
Than that a child, more than all other gifts
That earth can offer to declining man,
Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts,
And stirrings of inquietude, when they
By tendency of nature needs must fail.
Exceeding was the love he bare to him,
His heart and his heart's joy! For oftentimes
Old Michael, while he was a babe in arms,
Had done him female service, not alone
For pastime and delight, as is the use
Of fathers, but with patient mind enforced
To acts of tenderness; and he had rocked
His cradle, as with a woman's gentle hand.
And, in a later time, ere yet the Boy
Had put on boy's attire, did Michael love,
Albeit of a stern unbending mind,
To have the Young-one in his sight, when he
Wrought in the field, or on his shepherd's stool
Sate with a fettered sheep before him stretched
Under the large old oak, that near his door
Stood single, and, from matchless depth of shade,
Chosen for the Shearer's covert from the sun,
Thence in our rustic dialect was called
The CLIPPING TREE,[1] a name which yet it bears.
There, while they two were sitting in the shade,
With others round them, earnest all and blithe,
Would Michael exercise his heart with looks
Of fond correction and reproof bestowed
Upon the Child, if he disturbed the sheep
By catching at their legs, or with his shouts
Scared them, while they lay still beneath the shears.

[1] Clipping is the word used in the North of England for shearing.

And when by Heaven's good grace the boy grew up
A healthy Lad, and carried in his cheek
Two steady roses that were five years old;
Then Michael from a winter coppice cut
With his own hand a sapling, which he hooped
With iron, making it throughout in all
Due requisites a perfect shepherd's staff,
And gave it to the Boy; wherewith equipt
He as a watchman oftentimes was placed
At gate or gap, to stem or turn the flock;
And, to his office prematurely called,
There stood the urchin, as you will divine,
Something between a hindrance and a help;
And for this cause not always, I believe,
Receiving from his Father hire of praise;
Though nought was left undone which staff, or voice,
Or looks, or threatening gestures, could perform.
But soon as Luke, full ten years old, could stand
Against the mountain blasts; and to the heights,
Not fearing toil, nor length of weary ways,
He with his Father daily went, and they
Were as companions, why should I relate
That objects which the Shepherd loved before
Were dearer now? that from the Boy there came
Feelings and emanations—things which were
Light to the sun and music to the wind;
And that the old Man's heart seemed born again?
Thus in his father's sight the Boy grew up:
And now, when he had reached his eighteenth year,
He was his comfort and his daily hope.
While in this sort the simple household lived
From day to day, to Michael's ear there came
Distressful tidings. Long before the time
Of which I speak, the Shepherd had been bound

In surety for his brother's son, a man
Of an industrious life, and ample means;
But unforeseen misfortunes suddenly
Had prest upon him; and old Michael now
Was summoned to discharge the forfeiture,
A grievous penalty, but little less
Than half his substance. This unlooked-for claim
At the first hearing, for a moment took
More hope out of his life than he supposed
That any old man ever could have lost.
As soon as he had armed himself with strength
To look his trouble in the face, it seemed
The Shepherd's sole resource to sell at once
A portion of his patrimonial fields.
Such was his first resolve; he thought again,
And his heart failed him. "Isabel," said he,
Two evenings after he had heard the news,
"I have been toiling more than seventy years,
And in the open sunshine of God's love
Have we all lived; yet if these fields of ours
Should pass into a stranger's hand, I think
That I could not lie quiet in my grave.
Our lot is a hard lot; the sun himself
Has scarcely been more diligent than I;
And I have lived to be a fool at last
To my own family. An evil man
That was, and made an evil choice, if he
Were false to us; and, if he were not false,
There are ten thousand to whom loss like this
Had been no sorrow. I forgive him;—but
'Twere better to be dumb than to talk thus.
When I began, my purpose was to speak
Of remedies and of a cheerful hope.
Our Luke shall leave us, Isabel; the land

Shall not go from us, and it shall be free;
He shall possess it, free as is the wind
That passes over it. We have, thou know'st,
Another kinsman—he will be our friend
In this distress. He is a prosperous man,
Thriving in trade—and Luke to him shall go,
And with his kinsman's help and his own thrift
He quickly will repair this loss, and then
He may return to us. If here he stay,
What can be done? Where every one is poor,
What can be gained?"
At this the old Man paused,
And Isabel sat silent, for her mind
Was busy, looking back into past times.
There's Richard Bateman, thought she to herself,
He was a parish-boy—at the church-door
They made a gathering for him, shillings, pence
And halfpennies, wherewith the neighbours bought
A basket, which they filled with pedlar's wares;
And, with this basket on his arm, the lad
Went up to London, found a master there,
Who, out of many, chose the trusty boy
To go and overlook his merchandise
Beyond the seas; where he grew wondrous rich,
And left estates and monies to the poor,
And, at his birth-place, built a chapel floored
With marble, which he sent from foreign lands.
These thoughts, and many others of like sort,
Passed quickly through the mind of Isabel,
And her face brightened. The old Man was glad,
And thus resumed:—"Well, Isabel! this scheme
These two days, has been meat and drink to me.
Far more than we have lost is left us yet.
We have enough—I wish indeed that I

Were younger;—but this hope is a good hope.
Make ready Luke's best garments, of the best
Buy for him more, and let us send him forth
To-morrow, or the next day, or to-night:
—If he *could* go, the Boy should go to-night."
Here Michael ceased, and to the fields went forth
With a light heart. The Housewife for five days
Was restless morn and night, and all day long
Wrought on with her best fingers to prepare
Things needful for the journey of her son.
But Isabel was glad when Sunday came
To stop her in her work: for, when she lay
By Michael's side, she through the last two nights
Heard him, how he was troubled in his sleep:
And when they rose at morning she could see
That all his hopes were gone. That day at noon
She said to Luke, while they two by themselves
Were sitting at the door, "Thou must not go:
We have no other Child but thee to lose,
None to remember—do not go away,
For if thou leave thy Father he will die."
The Youth made answer with a jocund voice;
And Isabel, when she had told her fears,
Recovered heart. That evening her best fare
Did she bring forth, and all together sat
Like happy people round a Christmas fire.
With daylight Isabel resumed her work;
And all the ensuing week the house appeared
As cheerful as a grove in Spring: at length
The expected letter from their kinsman came,
With kind assurances that he would do
His utmost for the welfare of the Boy;
To which, requests were added, that forthwith
He might be sent to him. Ten times or more

The letter was read over; Isabel
Went forth to show it to the neighbours round;
Nor was there at that time on English land
A prouder heart than Luke's. When Isabel
Had to her house returned, the old Man said,
"He shall depart to-morrow." To this word
The Housewife answered, talking much of things
Which, if at such short notice he should go,
Would surely be forgotten. But at length
She gave consent, and Michael was at ease.
  Near the tumultuous brook of Greenhead Ghyll,
In that deep valley, Michael had designed
To build a Sheepfold; and, before he heard
The tidings of his melancholy loss,
For this same purpose he had gathered up
A heap of stones, which by the streamlet's edge
Lay thrown together, ready for the work.
With Luke that evening thitherward he walked:
And soon as they had reached the place he stopped,
And thus the old Man spake to him:—"My son,
To-morrow thou wilt leave me: with full heart
I look upon thee, for thou art the same
That wert a promise to me ere thy birth,
And all thy life hast been my daily joy.
I will relate to thee some little part
Of our two histories; 'twill do thee good
When thou art from me, even if I should touch
On things thou canst not know of.—After thou
First cam'st into the world—as oft befalls
To new-born infants—thou didst sleep away
Two days, and blessings from thy Father's tongue
Then fell upon thee. Day by day passed on,
And still I loved thee with increasing love.
Never to living ear came sweeter sounds

Than when I heard thee by our own fireside
First uttering, without words, a natural tune;
While thou, a feeding babe, didst in thy joy
Sing at thy Mother's breast. Month followed month,
And in the open fields my life was passed
And on the mountains; else I think that thou
Hadst been brought up upon thy Father's knees.
But we were playmates, Luke: among these hills,
As well thou knowest, in us the old and young
Have played together, nor with me didst thou
Lack any pleasure which a boy can know."
Luke had a manly heart; but at these words
He sobbed aloud. The old Man grasped his hand,
And said, "Nay, do not take it so—I see
That these are things of which I need not speak.
—Even to the utmost I have been to thee
A kind and a good Father: and herein
I but repay a gift which I myself
Received at others' hands; for, though now old
Beyond the common life of man, I still
Remember them who loved me in my youth.
Both of them sleep together: here they lived,
As all their Forefathers had done; and when
At length their time was come, they were not loth
To give their bodies to the family mould.
I wished that thou shouldst live the life they lived:
But, 'tis a long time to look back, my Son,
And see so little gain from threescore years.
These fields were burthened when they came to me;
Till I was forty years of age, not more
Than half of my inheritance was mine.
I toiled and toiled; God blessed me in my work,
And till these three weeks past the land was free.
—It looks as if it never could endure

Another Master. Heaven forgive me, Luke,
If I judge ill for thee, but it seems good
That thou shouldst go."
At this the old Man paused;
Then, pointing to the stones near which they stood,
Thus, after a short silence, he resumed:
"This was a work for us; and now, my Son,
It is a work for me. But, lay one stone—
Here, lay it for me, Luke, with thine own hands.
Nay, Boy, be of good hope;—we both may live
To see a better day. At eighty-four
I still am strong and hale;—do thou thy part;
I will do mine.—I will begin again
With many tasks that were resigned to thee:
Up to the heights, and in among the storms,
Will I without thee go again, and do
All works which I was wont to do alone,
Before I knew thy face.—Heaven bless thee, Boy!
Thy heart these two weeks has been beating fast
With many hopes; it should be so—yes—yes—
I knew that thou couldst never have a wish
To leave me, Luke: thou hast been bound to me
Only by links of love: when thou art gone,
What will be left to us!—But, I forget
My purposes. Lay now the corner-stone,
As I requested; and hereafter, Luke,
When thou art gone away, should evil men
Be thy companions, think of me, my Son,
And of this moment; hither turn thy thoughts,
And God will strengthen thee: amid all fear
And all temptation, Luke, I pray that thou
May'st bear in mind the life thy Fathers lived,
Who, being innocent, did for that cause
Bestir them in good deeds. Now, fare thee well—

When thou return'st, thou in this place wilt see
A work which is not here: a covenant
'Twill be between us; but, whatever fate
Befall thee, I shall love thee to the last,
And bear thy memory with me to the grave."
The Shepherd ended here; and Luke stooped down,
And, as his Father had requested, laid
The first stone of the Sheepfold. At the sight
The old Man's grief broke from him; to his heart
He pressed his Son, he kissèd him and wept;
And to the house together they returned.
—Hushed was that House in peace, or seeming peace,
Ere the night fell:—with morrow's dawn the Boy
Began his journey, and when he had reached
The public way, he put on a bold face;
And all the neighbours, as he passed their doors,
Came forth with wishes and with farewell prayers,
That followed him till he was out of sight.
A good report did from their Kinsman come,
Of Luke and his well-doing: and the Boy
Wrote loving letters, full of wondrous news,
Which, as the Housewife phrased it, were throughout
"The prettiest letters that were ever seen."
Both parents read them with rejoicing hearts.
So, many months passed on: and once again
The Shepherd went about his daily work
With confident and cheerful thoughts; and now
Sometimes when he could find a leisure hour
He to that valley took his way, and there
Wrought at the Sheepfold. Meantime Luke began
To slacken in his duty; and, at length,
He in the dissolute city gave himself
To evil courses: ignominy and shame
Fell on him, so that he was driven at last

To seek a hiding-place beyond the seas.
There is a comfort in the strength of love;
'Twill make a thing endurable, which else
Would overset the brain, or break the heart:
I have conversed with more than one who well
Remember the old Man, and what he was
Years after he had heard this heavy news.
His bodily frame had been from youth to age
Of an unusual strength. Among the rocks
He went, and still looked up to sun and cloud,
And listened to the wind; and, as before,
Performed all kinds of labour for his sheep,
And for the land, his small inheritance.
And to that hollow dell from time to time
Did he repair, to build the Fold of which
His flock had need. 'Tis not forgotten yet
The pity which was then in every heart
For the old Man—and 'tis believed by all
That many and many a day he thither went,
And never lifted up a single stone.
There, by the Sheepfold, sometimes was he seen
Sitting alone, or with his faithful Dog,
Then old, beside him, lying at his feet.
The length of full seven years, from time to time,
He at the building of this Sheepfold wrought,
And left the work unfinished when he died.
Three years, or little more, did Isabel
Survive her Husband: at his death the estate
Was sold, and went into a stranger's hand.
The Cottage which was named THE EVENING STAR
Is gone—the ploughshare has been through the ground
On which it stood; great changes have been wrought
In all the neighbourhood:—yet the oak is left
That grew beside their door; and the remains

> Of the unfinished Sheepfold may be seen
> Beside the boisterous brook of Greenhead Ghyll.

It was a frequent criticism upon Wordsworth's early work that it was not really faithful to the facts of English life. "Crabbe," said Jeffrey in 1807, "exhibits the common people of England pretty much as they are," while Wordsworth, and "the gentlemen of his school invent for themselves certain whimsical and unheard-of beings, to whom they impute some fantastical combination of feelings, and then labor to excite our sympathy for them, either by placing them in incredible situations, or by some strained and exaggerated moralization of a vague and tragical description. Mr. Crabbe, in short, shows us something which we have all seen, or may see in real life. . . . Mr. Wordsworth and his associates, on the other hand, introduce us to beings whose existence was not previously suspected by the acutest observer of nature; and excite an interest for them—when they do excite any interest—more by an eloquent and refined analysis of their own capricious feelings, than by any obvious or intelligible ground of sympathy in their situation.

It is true, as already said, that this criticism is

really beside the mark; it is worse than that—it is false. Wordsworth did not profess to "exhibit the common people of England pretty much as they are"; he was not concerned with the life of any social class as a whole. He was intent to discover and portray those fundamental virtues that make life strong and sweet; of such virtues no class has a monopoly, and striking examples of them are none too readily perceived in any class. Both the situations and the persons in Wordsworth's poems of humble life are doubtless exceptional. But they are not untrue nor exaggerated. Jeffrey is altogether wrong in his charge that Wordsworth's poor people are unreal or fantastic beings. They may not be representative of any class; but they are undeniably genuine.

It may be admitted, however, that Wordsworth was somewhat over-partial to that robust and homely type of character which he saw about him, and with which from boyhood he had been familiar. He doubtless thought that the virtues he most admired are oftenest to be found among "humble and rustic" folk. He had a distrust of the influence of cities. He showed an almost ascetic suspicion of a highly conventionalized, fashionable society. What is often

called culture—the refinements of artificial manners, the devotion to the fine arts, all the external graces and accomplishments which a complex society prizes —he thought to be of very doubtful value. They obscure the healthy native impulses of the man. And he believed with increasing intensity of conviction, that under such influences, English society of his day was rapidly becoming hollow and ostentatious. And in the early years of the last century, those days of the Regency, it certainly was—at all events in the cities. This apprehension finds utterance in one of the sonnets he wrote during a visit to London in the autumn of 1802:

> O friend! I know not which way I must look
> For comfort, being, as I am, opprest
> To think that now our life is only drest
> For show; mean handy-work of craftsman, cook,
> Or groom! We must run glittering like a Brook
> In the open sunshine, or we are unblest;
> The wealthiest man among us is the best;
> No grandeur now in nature or in book
> Delights us. Rapine, avarice, expense,
> This is idolatry; and these we adore:
> Plain living and high thinking are no more;
> The homely beauty of the good old cause
> Is gone; our peace, our fearful innocence,
> And pure religion breathing household laws.

Wordsworth would draw us away from the vain and garish attractions of such a life as this; in their place he puts the homely life of calm reflection, honest toil, fireside cares and steadfast affections. It was a service not merely to his age; it is a service of which there is perennial need. Merely to have made that phrase "Plain living and high thinking" familiar on the lips of three generations was better than to have written an idle romance.

And Wordsworth believed that it was in such simple lives, passed in healthy surroundings, and not blinded by convention, that we may expect clear recognition of those primitive convictions and impulses that are the foundation of character.

> The primal duties shine aloft like stars;
> The charities that sooth, and heal, and bless
> Are scattered at our feet like flowers.

Plain people understand the great truths of life well enough. The voice of conscience speaks audibly enough to humble men who have not learned to sophisticate or evade it. The affections often are strongest where the life is simplest. It was Wordsworth's supreme interest in these essential forces of our moral nature, his desire to show them in their

purest and most attractive forms that account for most of his poems of "humble and rustic life." A few of the earliest ones were spoiled by a kind of operose simplicity—the grave and rigid man trying to be childlike; but the later ones contain much of his wisest and most familiar work.

It is this desire to get back to the primitive and fundamental things in human nature that explains Wordsworth's interest in childhood. In children he never had much personal interest. "He never cared for children, however," said an old man who in his boyhood had known the poet, "ye may be certain o' that, for didn't I have to pass him four times a week up to his door wi' meat? And he never once said owt. Ye're well aware if he'd been fond of children he ud a spoke." Another of his old neighbors thought that he perhaps might have been fond of children, "but children were never fond o' him." The fact seems to be that he never showed much sympathy for the childishness of childhood; his nature was too rigid for that. But he always had a wondering, questioning interest in the child mind. One or two of his poems for children, like *The Pet Lamb,* have simplicity, but they are not otherwise noteworthy.

But others of his poems of child life are very different. The inmost charm of such a poem as *We Are Seven,* which is far from being commonplace, resides, not in its pathos—which perhaps is commonplace—but in the quiet insistence with which this little maid, upon whom our clayey mortality has as yet no power, clings to the truth that we are spirit, the glad primitive instinct of life that makes her unable, even in the presence of the little mound, to conceive our gloomy illusion of death.

—A simple Child,
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death?

I met a little cottage Girl:
She was eight years old, she said;
Her hair was thick with many a curl
That clustered round her head.

She had a rustic, woodland air,
And she was wildly clad:
Her eyes were fair, and very fair;
—Her beauty made me glad.

"Sisters and brothers, little maid,
How many may you be?"
"How many? Seven in all," she said,
And wondering looked at me.

"And where are they? I pray you tell."
She answered, "Seven are we;
And two of us at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea.

"Two of us in the church-yard lie,
My sister and my brother;
And, in the church-yard cottage, I
Dwell near them with my mother."

"You say that two at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea,
Yet ye are seven! I pray you tell,
Sweet Maid, how this may be."

Then did the little Maid reply,
"Seven boys and girls are we;
Two of us in the church-yard lie,
Beneath the church-yard tree."

"You run about, my little Maid,
Your limbs they are alive;
If two are in the church-yard laid,
Then ye are only five."

"Their graves are green, they may be seen,"
The little Maid replied,
"Twelve steps or more from my mother's door,
And they are side by side.

"My stockings there I often knit,
My kerchief there I hem;
And there upon the ground I sit,
And sing a song to them.

"And often after sun-set, Sir,
When it is light and fair,
I take my little porringer,
And eat my supper there.

"The first that died was sister Jane;
In bed she moaning lay,
Till God released her of her pain,
And then she went away.

"So in the church-yard she was laid;
And when the grass was dry
Together round the grave we played,
My brother John and I.

"And when the ground was white with snow,
And I could run and slide,
My brother John was forced to go,
And he lies by her side."

"How many are you then," said I,
"If they two are in heaven?"
Quick was the little maid's reply,
"O Master! we are seven."

"But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!"
'Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, "Nay, we are seven!"

The beautiful lines to six-year-old Hartley Coleridge are touched with the same wonder at the child mind, "whose fancies from afar are brought."

TO H. C.

O thou! whose fancies from afar are brought;
Who of thy words dost make a mock apparel,
And fittest to unutterable thought
The breeze-like motion and the self-born carol;
Thou faery voyager! that dost float
In such clear water, that thy boat
May rather seem
To brood on air than on an earthly stream;
Suspended in a stream as clear as sky,
Where earth and heaven do make one imagery;
O blessèd vision! happy child!
Thou art so exquisitely wild,
I think of thee with many fears
For what may be thy lot in future years.

I thought of times when Pain might be thy guest,
Lord of thy house and hospitality;
And Grief, uneasy lover! never rest
But when she sate within the touch of thee.
O too industrious folly!
O vain and causeless melancholy!
Nature will either end thee quite;
Or, lengthening out thy season of delight,
Preserve for thee, by individual right,
A young lamb's heart among the full-grown flocks.
What hast thou to do with sorrow,
Or the injuries of to-morrow?
Thou art a dew-drop, which the morn brings forth,
Ill fitted to sustain unkindly shocks,
Or to be trailed along the soiling earth;
A gem that glitters while it lives,
And no forewarning gives;

> But, at the touch of wrong, without a strife
> Slips in a moment out of life.

Of course it is in the great *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*—quoted in a following chapter—that this feeling of the primitive clearness of the intuitions of childhood is expressed with the most wonderful richness and depth of suggestion.

This may be the most fitting place for a brief consideration of Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction; though the critics have probably given it quite as much attention as it deserves. In the *Preface* to the *Lyrical Ballads* it will be remembered that Wordsworth averred that he had found the language, as well as the lives, of humble and rustic folk best fitted for poetic use. "The language of these men," he said, "has been adopted, purified indeed from what appears to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational cause of dislike or disgust," because, as "those men hourly communicate with the objects from which the best part of language is originally derived," and as they are free from social vanity, their speech is likely to be simple and serene. Now here Wordsworth is in reality protesting against the "poetic diction" of the eighteenth century. Pope, Thomson, Gray and the other poets of

their time who dreaded everything coarse or rustic, never dared to call plain things by plain names, but had framed especially for out-of-door objects a large vocabulary that was never heard out-of-door. In their verse you learn, not that it rains, but that

> The clouds indulge their genial stores;

not that birds sing, but that "the plumy people"

> Strike at once into the general choir;

not that the sun rises, but that

> Reddening Phœbus lifts his golden fire.

Wordsworth was naturally irritated by these superior academic people who viewed the life of humble folk from the club or the study, and regarded Nature unadorned as a little vulgar. He was inclined to insist, not only that the best fields of poetry are precisely those which these poets refused to enter, but that the most genuinely poetic forms of speech are those which they studiously avoided. He certainly carried this protest too far. The speech of plain men, no matter whence derived, may be best for the plain man when he is speaking for himself;

but it does not follow that it is best for the poet, even for William Wordsworth. In fact very little of Wordsworth's poetry is really cast in the diction of "humble and rustic" folk. He did not know that diction. He did not converse familiarly with his neighbors on the roadside or at their cottage doors. A man so reserved and solitary in his habits could never really get their speech upon his tongue. In some of the earliest *Lyrical Ballads* his attempts "to adopt the very language" of the people in his verse occasionally led into mere banality—that worst kind of affectation, the affectation of simplicity. He tells us that Goody Blake in winter can never get enough fire-wood to warm her for three days, and thus

> Sad case it was as you may think,
> For very cold to go to bed,
> And then for cold not sleep a wink.

He tells us that near an old thorn tree

> You see a little muddy pond
> Of water never dry;
> I've measured it from side to side;
> 'Tis three feet long and two feet wide.

When Betty Foy sends away her Idiot Boy we are told that

> Betty's most especial charge
> Was "Johnny! Johnny! mind that you
> Come home again, nor stop at all,
> Come home again, whate'er befall
> My Johnny do, I pray you do."

Such passages are doubtless a selection from the speech of humble folk; but the selection is not wisely made.

Wordsworth was entirely right in his feeling that the one essential in the treatment of simple or homely themes is absolute sincerity. A single note of sentimentality or of rhetorical effort may be fatal. But such sincerity is not to be gained by the effort to adopt some particular diction. When Wordsworth's sympathies are deeply moved he does attain this absolute sincerity. The style of such a poem as *Michael,* for example, is nearly perfect; one doesn't see how it could be better, or even different. To speak exactly, the poem seems to have no style. There is no question of diction. The fact or feeling lies clear in the word. It is no explanation of such writing as this to say that it is in the speech of common people. Common people do not speak like this. It is barely possible that there may be no word employed that could not be found in the vocabulary of one of Wordsworth's intelligent,

church-going neighbors; but the instinctive choice of the right word, the order of words, the solemn movement in natural subservience to the feeling of the passage—all this is not the speech of shepherds. It is the speech of a great poet.

In a later paragraph of his *Preface,* pushing still further his argument against an artificial poetic diction, Wordsworth finally asserts, without qualification, that there "Neither is nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." This opinion might hardly be worth consideration were it not for the unfortunate influence it exerted upon Wordsworth's poetry. For the only thing to be said of it is, that, in any intelligent interpretation, it is not true. The vocabulary of prose and that of poetry are not identical. It may happen that many specimens of an austere and simple kind of poetry—much of Wordsworth's, for example—may present no words that would not be appropriate in prose; but the converse is not true. It is not true that all words fit for a pure and dignified prose are equally fit for poetry. It would be hard to find a dozen pages of good prose that did not contain words not likely to be found in poetry. The reason is clear. Poetry is—or should be—at

every point the language of emotion; prose only incidentally so. The simple law is that poetry should admit no word, which, because of its predominant intellectual content, or because of its habitual associations, is unfitted to sustain emotion. There are, therefore, whole classes of words, the diction of science, of commerce, of politics, and in general all terms expressive of complex or unfamiliar intellectual processes, which, though appropriate in dignified prose, will be excluded from poetry. Wordsworth too often forgot that—with deplorable results. At his best, as we have seen, his style is incomparable; and, in general whenever his emotions are deeply stirred, his language is genuinely poetical. But he occasionally attempts a pathetic or romantic theme with which he is not thoroughly in sympathy, and then he can scatter through his lines bits of hard gritty prose that fairly make the reader shiver. Thus in an unfortunate moment he decided to retell the story of that pathetic old Scotch ballad, *Burd Helen;* here are three stanzas of his version:

> Proud Gordon, maddened by the thoughts
> That through his brain *are travelling*
> Rushed forth, and at the heart of Bruce
> He launched a deadly javelin!

Fair Ellen saw it as it came,
And, starting up *to meet the same,*
Did with her body cover
The Youth, her chosen lover.

And, falling into Bruce's arms,
Thus died the beauteous Ellen,
Thus from the heart of her True-love,
The mortal spear *repelling.*
And Bruce, as soon as he had slain
The Gordon, sailed away to Spain;
And fought with rage *incessant*
Against the Moorish crescent.

But many days and many months,
And many years *ensuing,*
This wretched Knight did vainly seek
The death that he was wooing.
So, coming his last help to cran,
Heart-broken, upon Ellen's grave
His body he extended,
And then his sorrow ended.

But it is in the reflective passages of his later and longer poems that Wordsworth most frequently shows his strange disregard of the essential difference between poetry and prose. Here the homely and familiar style is out of the question. Wordsworth himself is speaking. And when his reflections or his memories stir his feelings deeply and awaken his imagination, he can write a blank verse

that for dignity and power has seldom been surpassed in English poetry. The following lines are from his description of the youth of the Wanderer, in the First Book of *The Excursion:* but they are the record of an hour of his own boyhood.

> Such was the Boy—but for the growing Youth
> What soul was his, when from the naked top
> Of some bold headland, he beheld the sun
> Rise up and bathe the world in light! He looked—
> Ocean and earth, the solid frame of earth
> And ocean's liquid mass, in gladness lay
> Beneath him:—Far and wide the clouds were touched
> And in their silent faces could he read
> Unutterable love. Sound needed none,
> Nor any voice of joy; his spirit drank
> The spectacle; sensation, soul, and form,
> All melted into him; they swallowed up
> His animal being; in them did he live,
> And by them did he live; they were his life.
> In such access of mind, in such high hour
> Of visitation from the living God,
> Thought was not; in enjoyment it expired.
> No thanks he breathed, he proffered no request:
> Rapt into still communion that transcends
> The imperfect offices of prayer and praise,
> His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
> That made him; it was blessedness and love!
>
> *Excursion,* I, 196-218.

But at other times he can deliver himself at great length, upon some essentially prosaic theme, such

as education or the poor laws, with a certain orotund eloquence but without a single gleam of imagination; and then his doctrine that there is no difference between the language of poetry and that of prose blinds him to the fact that what he has written is hardly poetry at all.

> O for the coming of that glorious time
> When, prizing knowledge as her noblest wealth
> And best protection, this imperial Realm
> While she exacts allegiance, shall admit
> An obligation on her part, to *teach*
> Them who are born to serve her and obey;
> Binding herself by statute to secure
> For all the children whom her soil maintains
> The rudiments of letters, and inform
> The mind with moral and religious truth,
> Both understood and practised,—so that none
> However destitute, be left to droop
> By timely culture unsustained; or run
> Into wild disorder; or be forced
> To drudge through a weary life without the help
> Of intellectual implements and tools.
>
> *Excursion*, IX, 295.

These might be wise remarks before the Educational Council; but they are hardly poetry.

Still worse is another kind of passage, not infrequent in his work, in which he is both prosaic and mystical. When his emotion has been vaguely

stirred by some large reflection he endeavors to convey his emotion by stating the course of reflection before it has taken any definite shape in his imagination. Such a passage as the following is not poetry —it is not even good prose.

> Happy he who lives to understand,
> Not human nature only, but explores
> All natures—to the end that he may find
> The law that governs each; and where begins
> The union, the partition where, that makes
> Kind and degree, among all visible Beings;
> The constitution, power, and faculties,
> Which they inherit—cannot step beyond—
> And cannot fall beneath; that do assign
> To every class its station and its office,
> Through all the mighty commonwealth of things
> Up from the creeping plant to sovereign Man.
> Such converse, if directed by a meek,
> Sincere and humble spirit, teaches love;
> For knowledge is delight; and such delight
> Breeds love; yet, suited as it rather is
> To thought and to the climbing intellect,
> It teaches less to love, than to adore;
> If that be not indeed the highest love!
>
> *Excursion*, IV, 332.

All which imports that Wordsworth never had any quick sense of the properties and possibilities of language. He failed to understand all those delicate or subtle powers of phrase of which he had himself

no mastery; and here, as elsewhere, he mistook the limitations of his own genius for universal laws. The one virtue of speech in his thought was sincerity. His word must have a plain meaning. But very often the first value of a word resides not in its plain and obvious meaning, but in its associations and suggestions, in the nimbus of feeling which it wears. That is especially the case in poetry. For the object of poetry is always to express emotion; and language is not primarily the organ of the emotions but of the intellect. It can convey emotion chiefly by a variety of indirections, by felicities of arrangement, by rhythm and cadence, and especially by all sorts of association and suggestion that may touch the imagination. Feeling absolutely simple and deep may usually be conveyed by the mere mention of its cause; but the poet who attempts to convey the more complex and reflective emotion by the plain diction of prose will often succeed in giving, not the feeling itself, but only a cold statement of the process of reflection out of which the feeling arose.

CHAPTER VII

NATURE

EVERYBODY knows that Wordsworth is in an especial sense the poet of out-of-doors. Remove from his work all that which was directly or indirectly inspired by the phenomena of the external world, and you have taken away full two-thirds of all that is of permanent familiarity and value. It was the outdoor life of his boyhood in Hawkshead that had prompted his first efforts at verse. After his early period of enthusiasm for liberty and its disappointment he had turned away from men and action to live the life of placid observation and reflection. His world was a narrow and secluded one, and in that world he seemed to live rather with things than with men, and sometimes with trivial things. His early critics charged that his strange interest in merely nature objects led him sometimes into puerility and sometimes into mysticism. The *Edinburgh* in its notice of the *Lyrical Ballads* de-

clared the lines to the *Lesser Celandine* "a piece of namby-pamby," and *The Cuckoo* "a rapturous mystical ode in which the author, striving after force and originality, produces nothing but absurdity."

TO THE CUCKOO

O blithe New-comer! I have heard,
I hear thee and rejoice.
O Cuckoo! shall I call thee Bird,
Or but a wandering Voice?

While I am lying on the grass
Thy twofold shout I hear,
From hill to hill it seems to pass,
At once far off, and near.

Though babbling only to the Vale,
Of sunshine and of flowers,
Thou bringest unto me a tale
Of visionary hours.

Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring!
Even yet thou art to me
No bird, but an invisible thing,
A voice, a mystery;

The same whom in my school-boy days
I listened to; that Cry
Which made me look a thousand ways
In bush, and tree, and sky.

To seek thee did I often rove
Through woods and on the green;
And thou wert still a hope, a love;
Still longed for, never seen.

And I can listen to thee yet;
Can lie upon the plain
And listen, till I do beget
That golden time again.

O blessèd Bird! the earth we pace
Again appears to be
An unsubstantial, faery place;
That is fit home for Thee!

As late as 1850, when *The Prelude* appeared, Macaulay could see little in it but "the old raptures about mountains and cataracts; the old flimsy philosophy about the effect of scenery on the mind; the old crazy mystical metaphysics." Even so genuine a lover of Wordsworth as Arthur Hugh Clough, regretted the poet's tendency to consider "larks and linnets, celandines and daisies, 'the proper subject of mankind.'" But to Wordsworth's thought, nothing in nature was really trivial. For himself he always believed that in the development of his own moral life the influence of Man had been distinctly subservient to that of Nature. In a familiar passage, he accounts himself fortunate that,

from the first dawn of childhood, his thoughts and passions had been intwined

> With high objects, with enduring things,
> With life and nature.

This early sensitiveness to the spiritual influence of nature, which is recorded vividly in *The Prelude,* continued through all the most poetic period of his life, and explains much that is most characteristic in his work.

Wordsworth is not, strictly speaking, a descriptive poet. He did not see the landscape in all its details of form and color. He did not wish to. He knew that the mere seeing, the minute and accurate inspection, was sometimes a positive hindrance to the imagination. Speaking of his eager and unimaginative youth, he says:

> I speak in recollection of a time
> When the *bodily eye, in every stage of life*
> *The most despotic of our senses,* gained
> Such strength in me as often held my mind
> In absolute dominion.

This tyranny of the eye is doubtless one obstacle in any attempt to render directly the impressions derived from nature. It is matter of familiar expe-

rience with us who are not poets that beautiful things often seem more beautiful in memory than they did before our eyes, and derive an added charm from the fact that we have dropped out of our picture all irrelevant and blurring elements. The first task of the descriptive poet must always be to select among the many details given in sight or in memory, and then so to arrange and combine these details that they can be imaged together and will give the impression of a whole. This art of detailed description is comparatively new in English literature. Tennyson may be called the first master of it in poetry, Ruskin in prose. Shelley could render the changing scenery of the clouds and sky, now flooded with light, and now torn by the wild tumult of storm; but no poet before Tennyson has quite his power to accumulate and combine beautiful details. His poetry is a gallery of pictures, vivid in form and color. Sometimes in a line or two—

> The rounded moon
> Through the tall oriel on the rolling sea,

but more often Tennyson loves to enumerate one by one the exquisite features of his landscape, dwelling in imagination upon each as they coalesce in one gra-

cious whole. Many of the lyrics of the *In Memoriam* are almost perfect examples of this. In such a beautiful lyric, for instance as number eleven, beginning

Calm is the morn without a sound,

in which all the varied objects in the description blend softly into the wide landscape that lies in sad autumnal light.

But Wordsworth's treatment of nature is very different. It has been truly said that there is no scenery in Wordsworth. He does not make his landscape into pictures, because he does not see it in pictures. Indeed, he hardly can be said to see a landscape, for that term implies a certain picturesque limitation of view. In fact, the purely esthetic sensibility was feeble in Wordsworth. His observation never rests in the simple enjoyment of sensuous beauty, however pure or exquisite. His imagination is always busy to interpret to his emotions the meaning of what he sees. He will not dwell with delight upon its charm for the sense: he perceives rather its deeper and more distinctively imaginative suggestions. He is likely, therefore, to depict the larger, more impressive forms of nature; and to render the total effect of what he describes rather

than to dwell upon its details. Even in those passages most nearly descriptive in character, there is not much minute detail of form or color; the impression of the scene will be found to reside principally in one or two features which have some special power over the imagination.

If Wordsworth rarely takes the purely esthetic and picturesque view of nature, it is a little surprising, on the other hand, that he still more rarely gives expression to that simple primitive joy in nature which all normal people feel. He lived out-of-door; but he seldom seems to think the mere unreflecting joy in sun and air and life a fit subject for the poet. Yet that feeling has inspired some very excellent poetry. It is thoroughly healthy, and is inconsistent with anything morbid or affected. As the temper of simple unsophisticated folk, it is common in all early poetry. Chaucer's verse is full of it. He knew nothing of the meaning and mystery of nature, or whether it have any; but he sends his stoutest knight into the fields, glad of heart in a May morning, and singing

> Welcome be thou, faire fresshe May!
> I hope that I some green geten may.

And Chaucer's contemporary, the author of *Piers Plowman,* begins his great poem, on a May morning,

> In a somer season, when soft was the sonne,
> I shope me in shroudes as I shepe were,
> Went wyde in this world, wondres to here.

But it is only very seldom that Wordsworth cares to record this simple joy that is unmixed with thought. The pretty little extempore written one March morning while resting by Brothers Water—lines which Joanna Baillie is said to have liked, and which Chaucer might have liked—is one of the few examples of such verse; a gush of spontaneous, almost physical gladness in the sights and sounds of cheerful morning.

> The Cock is crowing,
> The stream is flowing,
> The small birds twitter,
> The lake doth glitter,
> The green field sleeps in the sun;
> The oldest and youngest
> Are at work with the strongest;
> The cattle are grazing,
> Their heads never raising;
> There are forty feeding like one!
>
> Like an army defeated
> The snow hath retreated,

And now doth fare ill
On the top of the bare hill;
The Ploughboy is whooping—anon—anon:
There's joy in the mountains;
There's life in the fountains;
Small clouds are sailing,
Blue sky prevailing;
The rain is over and gone!

This simple gratification of the senses is, however, at the basis of all our higher and more complex enjoyment of nature. There are some lofty passages in Wordsworth's poetry, in which this primitive feeling, without interpreting itself in thought or relating itself to any special objects, rises into a vague but intense sympathy with all external life and seems almost to long for identification with the imperious forces of Nature. Thus in the Fourth Book of *The Excursion* the Solitary's description of the solemn forms and activities of nature in his mountain retreat rouses the poet to a noble rhapsody of desire:

The Solitary lifted toward the hills
A kindling eye:—accordant feelings rushed
Into my bosom, whence these words broke forth:
"Oh! what a joy it were, in vigorous health,
To have a body (this our vital frame
With shrinking sensibility endued,
And all the nice regards of flesh and blood)

And to the elements surrender it
As if it were a spirit!—How divine,
The liberty, for frail, for mortal, man
To roam at large among unpeopled glens
And mountainous retirements, only trod
By devious footsteps; regions consecrate
To oldest time! and, reckless of the storm
That keeps the raven quiet in her nest,
Be as a presence or a motion—one
Among the many there; and while the mists
Flying, and rainy vapours, call out shapes
And phantoms from the crags and solid earth
As fast as a musician scatters sounds
Out of an instrument; and while the streams
(As at a first creation and in haste
To exercise their untried faculties)
Descending from the region of the clouds,
And starting from the hollows of the earth
More multitudinous every moment, rend
Their way before them—what a joy to roam
An equal among mightiest energies;
And haply sometimes with articulate voice,
Amid the deafening tumult, scarcely heard
By him that utters it, exclaim aloud,
'Rage on, ye elements! let moon and stars
Their aspects lend, and mingle in their turn
With this commotion (ruinous though it be)
From day to night, from night to day, prolonged!'"
Excursion IV, 505-539.

But this mood of enthusiastic emotional surrender was never quite natural to a temper so austere and self-contained as Wordsworth's. His more

characteristic mood is one of quiet reflection in which the mind lies open to impressions from without. He does not, like some nature lovers—Thoreau for example—retire of set purpose into the solitudes to see what he can find there. There is always likely to be something of pose in such a love of nature as that. Thoreau himself, in fact, never really much loved Nature with a big N: he only liked natural things, as most of us do, and was rather proud of living in the woods a year or two where he could see more of them than most of us can. But Wordsworth's most delightful nature poems are concerned with "common things that round us lie." He is not on the watch for impressions, striving to catch some universal fact or some new grace or hidden meaning. But in an hour of quiet reflection, some common object, something "that of itself will come," will flash upon his imagination with a kind of glad surprise. Many of his shorter poems derive their charm from this power to give to the reader a fresh imaginative delight in simplest things. What else keeps alive these lines that everybody knows and loves?—

THE DAFFODILS

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Any familiar sight or sound—more frequently a sound—may thus suddenly touch some chord of memory that thrills with gladness or regret. Thus

he hears the twofold shout of the cuckoo, and the note calls back again the early days when first he heard it, till as he listens the joy of that golden time returns, the walls of the present drop away, and

> This earth we pace
> Again appears to be
> An unsubstantial, faery place
> That is fit home for thee.

Still more numerous, perhaps, are those short poems in which his imagination rests with a kind of sense of companionship upon some familiar object to perceive and enjoy its essential meaning. To Peter Bell,

> A yellow cowslip by the river's brim
> A yellow cowslip 'twas to him,
> And it was nothing more.

To Wordsworth, the interest of the flower resided almost entirely in that something "more." The poems on daisies and celandines, which some of the critics thought trivial, would be trivial if they were merely descriptive, and would be little better if the poet used the flower merely to embellish some pretty sentiment. But to the imagination of Wordsworth, the daisy had a character of its own; it was the em-

bodiment of some qualities that appeal to our sympathy and our affection. He had never written a poem on a daisy, he once said, but on *the* daisy—quite a different thing. One of these poems affords a good example of the distinction Wordsworth used to make between the imagination and the fancy. In the opening stanzas of this little poem, the fancy plays about the flower, calling it a score of pretty names that seem not inappropriate to a playful ingenuity; but in the last stanza the imagination settles lovingly upon its essential character and message:

TO THE DAISY

With little here to do or see
Of things that in the great world be,
Daisy! again I talk to thee,
    For thou art worthy,
Thou unassuming Common-place
Of Nature, with that homely face,
And yet with something of a grace,
    Which Love makes for thee!

Oft on the dappled turf at ease
I sit, and play with similes,
Loose types of things through all degrees,
    Thoughts of thy raising:
And many a fond and idle name
I give to thee, for praise or blame,
As is the humour of the game,
    While I am gazing.

A nun demure of lowly port;
Or sprightly maiden, of Love's court,
In thy simplicity the sport
Of all temptations;
A queen in crown of rubies drest;
A starveling in a scanty vest;
Are all, as seems to suit thee best,
Thy appellations.

A little Cyclops, with one eye
Staring to threaten and defy,
That thought comes next—and instantly
The freak is over,
The shape will vanish—and behold
A silver shield with boss of gold,
That spreads itself, some faery bold
In fight to cover!

I see thee glittering from afar—
And then thou art a pretty star;
Not quite so fair as many are
In heaven above thee!
Yet like a star, with glittering crest,
Self-poised in air thou seem'st to rest;—
May peace come never to his nest,
Who shall reprove thee!

Bright *Flower!* for by that name at last,
When all my reveries are past,
I call thee, and to that cleave fast,
Sweet silent creature!
That breath'st with me in sun and air,
Do thou, as thou art wont, repair
My heart with gladness, and a share
Of thy meek nature!

Such short poems as these are the record of Wordsworth's joys. His life was fed, doubtless, from deep wells of domestic affection; but it is impossible to read his poetry without feeling that he found a deep and quiet pleasure in those commonplace objects that make the familiar roadside beauty of life. He has perhaps rendered us no greater service than to show us how high imaginative delights can be drawn from humble sources, to teach us how

> To drink out of an humbler urn
> A lowlier pleasure.

In all this, however, there is nothing peculiar to Wordsworth. No poet who has had any marked susceptibility to the influence of nature has altogether escaped those moods of elation or of calm which have a certain ethical value. But in the thought of Wordsworth the influence of Nature meant something more than this. All through the poetry of his best period runs the belief in the power of the external world to teach moral truth and to exert an influence in the formation of moral character. That belief is expressed in the most positive and unhesitating fashion in some of his most familiar passages.

Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth
Our minds and hearts to bless—
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

The lovely poem on Lucy affirms the same belief:

Three years she grew in sun and shower,
Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown:
This Child I to myself will take:
She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own.

"Myself will to my darling be
Both law and impulse, and with me
The Girl in rock and plain,
In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain."

In *The Prelude* and *Excursion* are many passages to the same effect. One only may be quoted, drawn from the poet's own experience:

If this be error, and another faith
Find easier access to the pious mind,
Yet were I grossly destitute of all
Those human sentiments that make this earth
So dear, if I should fail with grateful voice
To speak of you, ye mountains, and ye lakes
And sounding cataracts, ye mists and winds
That dwell among the hills where I was born.
If in my youth I have been pure in heart,
If, mingling with the world, I am content
With my own modest pleasures, and have lived
With God and Nature communing, removed
From little enmities and low desires,
The gift is yours;

. . . . . .

the gift is yours,
Ye winds and sounding cataracts! 'tis yours,
Ye mountains! thine, O Nature! Thou hast fed
My lofty speculations; and in thee,
For this uneasy heart of ours, I find
A never-failing principle of joy
And purest passion.

Prelude II, 419-432, 445-451.

Now it will not do to put aside such passages as mere poetic exaggeration or unintelligible mysticism. They express one of Wordsworth's deepest convictions; any reader who regards them as meaningless will never fully understand Wordsworth's peculiar message. Lord Morley, commenting upon the first of the passages just cited, declares

bluntly that "one impulse from a vernal wood" can never teach us anything at all; but Lord Morley must speak only for himself. Wordsworth may perhaps be charged with mysticism; he can not be accused of nonsense. Surely it ought to seem evident to any one that "moral evil and good" are to be learned not principally by precept, but by sympathy and aversion—and all the sages from Aristotle down can not teach us much in that way. But one *impulse* from a vernal wood may be to a man like the voice of God in the burning bush. Nature, if she teaches us at all, teaches us through our emotions; and our emotions have always some ethical value. They tend to strengthen and elevate, or to weaken and depress, our character. In fact, Lord Morley might have assented to Wordsworth's statement without altogether agreeing with Wordsworth's philosophy. For everybody admits that there is at least an analogy between our ethical and our esthetical sentiments, and that the one may strengthen the other. The intimate relation between them is attested by language itself; we have a whole vocabulary of epithets, such as beautiful, lovely, gentle, calm, lofty, sublime, noble, which we apply instinctively to material or to moral objects. In-

deed, one whole theory of esthetics, Ruskin's—though not altogether satisfactory—explains our ideas of beauty in inanimate objects solely on the basis of their ethical suggestion. Some persons, it is true, owing to natural hebetude of temper or to preoccupation with other interests, seem hardly susceptible to any impressions from nature. But it is by no means contrary to general observation or experience that the man constantly played upon, especially in youth, by the sights and sounds of nature should, as Wordsworth affirms, find his thought and feelings, his whole moral temper, modified by such influences.

Upon Wordsworth these influences were especially powerful, not merely because of his natural susceptibility, but also because of the circumstances of his life. But the surroundings of Wordsworth's boyhood, as we have seen, had fostered a lonely companionship with nature, and with a nature not vulgarized by any prosaic or degrading works of man. Not infrequently the nobler forms of natural beauty fail of any powerful impression because they must be constantly associated with ugly forms of industry, so that they can not be isolated in thought and idealized in imagination. One iron foundry

may blacken a paradise and vulgarize Parnassus. It is not merely a sentimental regret that prompts Ruskin's lamentations over the progress of an industry that has turned some of the fairest regions of mid-England into a "Black Country." Such progress is inevitably accompanied by some moral loss. Wordsworth's early years were passed, not only in a country of austere and noble beauty, but among a people whose simple pastoral occupations were beautiful in themselves and seem to give a human charm to the countryside.

Yet nature could have had no such power upon a mind not schooled by intercourse with men and some wider experience of life. The native rustic will never look through Wordsworth's eyes. Perhaps, indeed, the most profound enjoyment of the external world is only possible when it is felt as a contrast to convention or a relief from futile effort. It is to be noted that all of Wordsworth's best nature poetry was written after—and not very long after—he had passed through his early period of political enthusiasm and disappointment. It was when his dream of social reform had faded and he was forced back upon himself that he first began to feel the full spiritual meaning of nature. The great

passages in the first two books of *The Prelude* record and interpret moments of vivid experiences in Hawkshead, fifteen years earlier.

But it is in the *Lines Above Tintern Abbey* that we find the clearest and most complete expression of the influence of nature upon Wordsworth's thought and feeling throughout all the best part of his life. Whoever would understand what nature meant to Wordsworth must know this poem by heart. There is little English poetry better worth knowing; it is hardly too much to say that no such noble verse, of such high thoughtfulness, had been written since the days of Milton. It may be well to quote it entire, and examine briefly its teaching.

LINES ABOVE TINTERN ABBEY

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur.—Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves

'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.

These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep

In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.
If this
Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft—
In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!
And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
The picture of the mind revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years. And so I dare to hope,
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first
I came among these hills; when like a roe
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led: more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads than one
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
And their glad animal movements all gone by)
To me was all in all.—I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,

Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.—That time is past,
And all its aching joys are now no more,
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense. For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

Nor perchance,
If I were not thus taught, should I the more
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:
For thou art with me here upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once,
My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer I make,
Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy: for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
Is full of blessings. Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee: and, in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then,
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,

Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations! Nor, perchance—
If I should be where I no more can hear
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams
Of past existence—wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream
We stood together; and that I, so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came
Unwearied in that service: rather say
With warmer love—oh! with far deeper zeal
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget
That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!

It was doubtless true, as he says in this poem, that through all the "fretful stir unprofitable" of the years immediately following his period of political disappointment and disillusion, the memory of his early Hawkshead experiences, of those strangely heightened feelings in the presence of nature, may have lightened many hours of weariness, prompted gentler thoughts, and have had, perhaps

No trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love.

But it was not until after he had learned to hear "the still sad music of humanity" that he could fully realize the lasting influence and value of those early impressions of nature. No poet has expressed so well the power of the familiar surroundings of daily life to renew and perpetuate the vital emotions of early years. Such gladness in the free open world, such sense of companionship with nature, persisting through the years, keep the man young. Wordsworth, though never caring much for what is called society, and having little ready affability, was never really solitary or morose. He had always a fund of wholesome feeling and a wholesome enjoyment of life. His habits of daily intercourse with nature did not cool his affections; precisely on the contrary, all natural forms of mountain or sky, of tree or flower, appealed to his human sympathies, and

> The meanest flower that blows could give
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

But the most important thing with reference to Wordsworth's poetry of nature remains to be said. Nowhere has he himself stated so clearly and briefly the belief that determined his attitude to-

ward the external world as in the most familiar lines of this great poem:

> And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.

In passages like this there is a recognition of something more than the influence of nature over our emotions; there is a recognition of the Source of such influence, and its consequent effect upon our moral life. In them we read Wordsworth's deepest philosophy. Not that he ever attempted to give a systematic statement of the truths which he conceived to underlie his feeling for nature; he probably did not much care for philosophic consistency or explanation. He was a poet, writing to give utterance to his profound convictions rather than any rational explanation of those convictions.

The critics have devoted a needless amount of rather foggy discussion to what they call Wordsworth's mysticism. Mysticism of a sort is inevita-

ble whenever we try to understand what life means, or to discover the source of those activities that are constantly playing upon our emotions. For mystery transcends, not contradicts, our intelligence. It begins at the point where the searching intellect is convinced of a further reality which yet it can not discover. The central doctrine of Wordsworth's philosophy, mystical if you choose to call it so, may be very simply stated. He accepted a belief in an all-pervading, intelligent life in nature, on the evidence of his emotions. But that is just what we all do; as a moment's reflection will show us. We all know that the common face of nature may sometimes have an effect upon our emotions like a soothing word or a noble deed. When Wordsworth says of the distant mountain peak that it sends

> Its own deep quiet to restore our hearts,

or bids the river

> Glide, fair stream, forever glide,
> Thy quiet soul on all bestowing,

it is not a fancy that he utters, but a fact. How it may be, perhaps we can not tell; but the fact is undeniable. And more than that we know. In our

moments of truest intuition, we are sure that the fact of that influence implies some deep affinities of being. It is absurd to say that quartz can generate quietude of soul, or H^2O can calm the mind. What is it but Spirit that can stir the spirit that is in us, that can suggest deep meanings to our intelligence or inspire to lofty and tender emotion? This belief may not admit any very explicit statement in terms, because, like all our deepest convictions, it is half emotion; but it is a belief in which philosophy, poetry, and religion are at one. And if you question its warrant, you will, at all events, find no better evidence for all our most profound convictions. Now in his best years, Wordsworth, more probably than most men, had this constant sense of a pervading, intelligent Life in nature. It was some vague form of this conviction that impressed him so deeply in his schoolboy days at Hawkshead when as yet he could not perceive its full significance. During his university years, he tells us in *The Prelude,* that this belief was leading him into "communion with highest truth."

> To every natural form, rock, fruit, or flower,
> Even the loose stones that cover the highway,
> I gave a moral life; I saw them feel,
> Or linked them to some feeling; the great mass

Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all
That I beheld respond with inward meaning.
Add that whate'er of Fervor or of Love
Or Beauty, Nature's daily face put on
From transitory passion, unto this
I was as sensitive as waters are
To the sky's influence in a kindred mood
Of passion: was obedient as a lute
That waits upon the touches of the wind.
Prelude III, 130-142.

His long years in the mountain quiet of the Lake District made a thoughtful and reverend sense of a Presence in nature the constant habit of his mind. There were indeed some high moments when it was forced upon him with unusual intensity, moments of almost mystic trance, when

The breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motions of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body and become a living Soul,
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of *things.*

But the certainty of a spiritual reality in nature was assumed in all his normal and ordinary thinking.

He did not try to confine his sense of this Spiritual Reality within any narrow or dogmatic statement. He knew that the sights and sounds of the

world stirred in him deep and varied emotions; he was content to apply to the Source of those emotions the comprehensive term Nature. At times the word stood in his thought for the Divine Personality.

> The Being that is in the clouds and air
> That is in the green leaves among the groves,
> Maintains a deep and reverential care
> For the unoffending creatures whom he loves.
> *Hart Leap Well*, 165.

Sometimes it is a larger, more abstract conception,

> Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe
> Thou Soul that art the Eternity of thought!

Sometimes he attributes to individual objects or activities a separate life, or thinks of them as manifesting one phase of the Universal Life. Thus in this wonderful passage from *The Excursion* the two lonely Langdale Pikes that keep watch over the secluded valley gather about themselves a throng of solemn forms of life.

> In genial mood,
> While at our pastoral banquet thus we sate
> Fronting the window of that little cell,
> I could not, ever and anon, forbear
> To glance an upward look on two huge Peaks,
> That from some other vale peered into this,

"Those lusty twins," exclaimed our host, "if here
It were your lot to dwell, would soon become
Your prized companions.—Many are the notes
Which, in his tuneful course, the wind draws forth
From rocks, woods, caverns, heaths, and dashing
shores;
And well those lofty brethren bear their part
In the wild concert—chiefly when the storm
Rides high; then all the upper air they fill
With roaring sound, that ceases not to flow,
Like smoke, along the level of the blast,
In mighty current; theirs, too, is the song
Of stream and headlong flood that seldom fails;
And, in the grim and breathless hour of noon,
Methinks that I have heard them echo back
The thunder's greeting. Nor have nature's laws
Left them ungifted with a power to yield
Music of finer tone; a harmony,
So do I call it, though it be the hand
Of silence, though there be no voice;—the clouds,
The mist, the shadows, light of golden suns,
Motions of moonlight, all come thither—touch,
And have an answer—thither come, and shape
A language not unwelcome to sick hearts
And idle spirits:—there the sun himself,
At the calm close of summer's longest day,
Rests his substantial orb;—between those heights
And on the top of either pinnacle,
More keenly than elsewhere in night's blue vault,
Sparkle the stars, as of their station proud.
Thoughts are not busier in the mind of man
Than the mute agents stirring there:—alone
Here do I sit and watch.—"

Excursion, II, 688-725.

This mode of regarding the world gives to all Wordsworth's references to nature a certain vital power hardly to be found in any other poetry. What in other poets is mere metaphor in him seems the expression of real truth. He says, for instance, simply,

> Unruffled doth the blue lake lie,
> *The mountains looking* on.

Or,

> The moon doth with delight
> Look round her when the heavens are bare.

Or, as the mountain Rothay rolls swollen down the valley,

> Loud is the vale—this inland depth
> In peace is roaring like a sea.
> Yon star upon the mountain top
> Is *listening quietly*.

Such passages make us feel the truth that this earth is not a dead thing, but informed with life, pulsating with the breath of infinite, manifold Being. It is, moreover, this sense of the life of things that gives to Wordsworth's descriptive phrase such remarkable suggestive power. No poet equals him here. He does not describe; he suggests the scene by giving that one detail in which its emotional effect is concentrated; our imagination does the rest.

The stars that move along the edges of the hills.

Simplicity of phrase could go no further; and yet how much better it is than acres of description! The strength of the steadfast hills, the silent infinity of the heavens, the unstaying courses of the stars—they are all in that line. And scores of such lines start at once into the memory of every lover of Wordsworth.

In all this, however, it may be said there is no warrant for Wordsworth's teaching as to the distinctively *moral* meaning and influence of Nature. Nothing in his poetry has seemed to many readers more fanciful or extravagant than his statements of the power of Nature to form and maintain the moral life. He even goes so far as to aver that he finds

> In nature and the language of the sense
> The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
> The guide, the guardian of my heart, and Soul
> Of all my moral being.

Such lines, after making allowance for poetic heightening of phrase—of which Wordsworth is seldom guilty—must certainly mean that Nature furnishes to us something more than that joy in common things, in daisies and daffodils, in the note of

the cuckoo and the song of the nightingale, and all those wayside pleasures which Wordsworth knew so well. On the other hand, Wordsworth, it will be urged, surely can not mean that in the phenomena of nature, nature often "red in tooth and claw," breeding pestilence and whirling the hurricane, he can find model or inspiration for "all his moral being." Of all the forms of optimism, none is quite so shallow as that which purports to be based on natural religion; which calmly closes its eyes on half the facts of the world to find an easy benevolence in the other half. Wordsworth was no such optimist. He is not to be thought of as shutting himself away from the great struggles of life in a quiet and beautiful corner, ignorant of all the fierce turmoil outside. He knew how many men must go all their lives in company with pain and fear. He had a stern, almost a hard, unflinching pathos which never blinked facts. Such a poem as the *Hart Leap Well* shows his sympathy even for the cruel lot of most of the lower animals. He could not fail to see that no mere observation of natural phenomena within the circuit of our knowledge can ever prove the all-pervading, intelligent Life in nature, of which he felt so sure, to be loving and benevolent.

And yet he held that belief with unshaken confidence. He was, with the exception of Robert Browning, the most sturdy optimist among modern English poets. And the ground of optimism was evidently the same in both the poets. They assumed the Intelligent Power at the source of things to be benevolent because they could not think otherwise. It was unthinkable that a Being surpassing us in power and knowledge should be inferior to us in goodness. Surely our loftiest conception of Being must embrace those qualities which ennoble humanity. Purity, joy, love, these are not qualities originating in our nature, and only fictitious when attributed to a Universal Intelligence. Wordsworth, at all events, could conceive of such Intelligence and Power only as combined with the supreme moral attributes. To think such a Universal Intelligence could be malign or morally indifferent was a violation of our fundamental moral intuitions. His feeling in the presence of the external world was not so much one of esthetic pleasure as an emotion of peace, of reverence, of love; and the more intense that feeling, the more pronounced and unmistakable its distinctively moral quality. The contemplation of nature, he held, does, therefore, in fact, stim-

ulate powerfully all our moral impulses, and strengthens our confidence in a Universal Benevolence at the Source of things,

> Our cheerful faith *that all which we behold*
> *Is full of blessing.*

If nature can generate and sustain such a cheerful faith as this, Wordsworth could say without exaggeration that it was

> The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
> Of all my moral being.

It is probable, however, that many of Wordsworth's readers will hardly be able to share this sentiment; they will not find in communion with nature such powerful moral support. They may share Wordsworth's "cheerful faith"; but they will find other, and to them more satisfactory, reasons for it. Some may even claim that logically he should have transposed his conclusion and his premises; that it is the antecedent faith in a Benevolent Power that justifies his interpretation of nature, and not his reading of nature that justifies his faith in a Benevolent Power. Grant that to be true: it makes little difference with the teaching of his verse. Doubtless his reverend temper and his early reli-

gious education did implant convictions that unconsciously directed all his emotions. It was true that what he called Nature appealed only to his purest and highest emotions, and that nothing else appealed to them so constantly or so powerfully. This was certainly a moral education. Such sensibility was the best of gifts; to be without it or to blind and deaden it were worse than to be "a Pagan suckled in a creed outworn." It is this sense of a glad general Life in things that makes his nature poetry so fresh and healthful. No other poet finds so much joy in the world. Any commonest object may send into his meditation some unexpected influence to calm or to gladden. Here is a bit of natural gospel from the tall grass that swayed in a vagrant air beside the ruined cottage of Margaret:

> I well remember that those very plumes,
> Those weeds, and the high spear grass on the wall
> By mist and silent rain-drops silvered o'er,
> As once I passed, into my heart conveyed
> So still an image of tranquillity,
> So calm and still, and looked so beautiful
> Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,
> That what we feel of sorrow and despair
> From ruin and from change, and all the grief
> The passing shows of being leave behind
> Appeared an idle dream.
>
> *Excursion* I, 942-952.

And while he is always thus finding some cheerful meaning in "common things that round us lie," the larger phenomena of nature, the mountain height that parleys with the setting sun, the misty mountain winds, the solemn pomp of the clouds, the silent starry sky of midnight, all seem, as nowhere else in English poetry, to speak in their own natural tones, and to be instinct with

> That sentiment of Being spread
> O'er all that moves and all that seemeth still;
> O'er all that, lost beyond the reach of thought
> And human knowledge, to the human eye
> Invisible, yet liveth to the heart.
>
> *Prelude* II, 401-405.

No one can read Wordsworth without gaining some quicker sense of the beauty and cheer of the world, "in widest commonality spread"; no one can drink deeply of his spirit without feeling with reverend joy, that behind all the shows of earth and sky is some solemn Power and Presence to which our souls are akin.

CHAPTER VIII

HIS PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

If thou indeed derive thy light from heaven,
Then, to the measure of that heaven-born light,
Shine, Poet, in thy place and be content:—
The stars pre-eminent in magnitude,
And they that from the zenith dart their beams,
(Visible though they be to half the earth,
Though half a sphere be conscious of their brightness)
Are yet of no diviner origin,
No purer essence, than the one that burns,
Like an untended watch-fire, on the ridge
Of some dark mountain; or than those which seem
Humbly to hang, like twinkling winter lamps,
Among the branches of the leafless trees;
All are the undying offspring of one Sire:
Then, to the measure of the light vouchsafed,
Shine, Poet, in thy place and be content.

THIS thoughtful sonnet written as late as 1832, well expresses Wordsworth's calm conviction of his mission as poet. From his earliest days the moral character and influence of poetry had been uppermost in his thought. The modern motto, "Art for art's sake," would have been to him not so much false as meaningless. As

we have seen, he had little care for any other than moral themes. Romance seemed idle to him unless somehow moralized. "A very pretty piece of paganism, sir," was the only commendation he could give young Keats for the *Endymion*. His early preference for humble and rustic life, too, is accounted for, not at all by that rather vulgar curiosity with reference to the homely and unfamiliar sides of life which is the motive of so much modern realism, but rather by the conviction that in humble lives the essential virtues of character can be seen without the disguises of tradition and convention. If his poetry of nature is truer and deeper than any other, it is because he felt as no other poet has, that beauty is essentially a moral power, and so could read "in nature and the language of the sense," meanings for our highest emotions. In his early manhood he had formed the determination to write some great moral poem, and tells us in the first book of *The Prelude* of his assurance that he did not

> Lack that first, great gift, the vital soul,
> Nor general Truths

out of which such a poem could be made. For Wordsworth's moral poetry is never the mere utterance of ethical sentiments. It has solid intellectual

quality. He is always striving to express those "general truths" that are the warrant for the demands of morality. He has a philosophical basis for his ethics. It was probably the great disappointment of his career that he could never realize the plan of his youth in a Philosophical poem that should have largeness and unity. But he need not have been much dissatisfied, for in his best period, when his powers were in their early maturity, he did write three shorter poems which are the noblest utterances in modern poetry upon the warrant and the nature of duty—the *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality,* the *Ode to Duty,* and *The Happy Warrior.*

It is true that not all critics have been in agreement as to the value of the *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality.* Professor Knight, in his edition of the poet's works, takes it out of its chronological place and puts it at the close, as "the greatest of Wordsworth's poems, and that to which all the others lead up." Mr. Emerson found in it the high-water mark of modern poetry, and declared it to be the best essay on personal immortality. On the other hand, Mr. Matthew Arnold thinks the central thesis of the poem not true, and all the "intimations" based upon it, therefore, "no great things." But

Mr. Arnold was always inclined to be a little too loftily censorious of Wordsworth's philosophy. The Platonic doctrine of reminiscence in childhood of a pre-existent state may be only a beautiful fancy, though One wiser than Plato has said that some things divinely hidden from the wise and prudent have been divinely revealed unto babes; but it is an admitted fact that most men feel a certain freshness and charm die out of life as the quickness and confidence of early perceptions are exchanged for the slower reasoning of our maturer years. In that fact Wordsworth found a hint as to the origin of those vague but profound convictions and intuitions which lie at the foundation of our moral nature. Who does not at times have suggestions from far within the soul which he can not express, glimpses of greater thought than he can shape into speech, intuitions half thought and half feeling which will not come out and sit down in the clear light of consciousness, but

> Which, be they what they may,
> Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
> Are yet a master-light of all our seeing.

We feel that our best knowledge is what we have never learned and can never teach, vision and im-

pulse lying back of all power to do or gain, divinely implanted and linking us to the Life Divine. If inspiration be the gift to utter the truths only accessible in our moments of deepest insight, then some parts of this great Ode must be accounted among the most genuinely inspired poetry of the last two centuries.

INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY FROM RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

I

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

II

The Rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the Rose,
The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare,
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair;
The sunshine is a glorious birth;
But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

III

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,
And while the young lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound,
To me alone there came a thought of grief:
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
And I again am strong:
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,
And all the earth is gay;
Land and sea
Give themselves up to jollity,
And with the heart of May
Doth every Beast keep holiday;—
Thou Child of Joy,
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy
Shepherd-boy!

IV

Ye blessèd Creatures, I have heard the call
Ye to each other make; I see
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;
My heart is at your festival,
My head hath its coronal,
The fulness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all.
Oh evil day! if I were sullen
While Earth herself is adorning,
This sweet May-morning,
And the Children are culling
On every side,
In a thousand valleys far and wide,
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm:—

I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!
—But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

V

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

VI

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
And no unworthy aim,

The homely Nurse doth all she can
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.

VII

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' Darling of a pigmy size!
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,
Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon him from his father's eyes!
See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art;
A wedding or a festival,
A mourning or a funeral;
And this hath now his heart,
And unto this he frames his song:
Then will he fit his tongue
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;
But it will not be long
Ere this be thrown aside,
And with new joy and pride
The little Actor cons another part;
Filling from time to time his "humorous stage"
With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,
That Life brings with her in her equipage;
As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation.

VIII

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy Soul's immensity;
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,

That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,—
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;
Thou, over whom thy Immortality
Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,
A Presence which is not to be put by;
To whom the grave
Is but a lonely bed without the sense or sight
Of day or the warm light,
A place of thought where we in waiting lie;
Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?
Full soon thy soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

IX

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!
The thought of our past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction: not indeed
For that which is most worthy to be blest;
Delight and liberty, the simple creed
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,
With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast:—
Not for these I raise
The song of thanks and praise;

But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realised,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised:
But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing;
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!
Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

X

Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
And let the young Lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound!
We in thought will join your throng,

Ye that pipe and ye that play,
Ye that through your hearts to-day
Feel the gladness of the May!
What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

XI

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
Forebode not any severing of our loves!
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;
I only have relinquished one delight
To live beneath your more habitual sway.
I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet;
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

Wordsworth protested against the inference from the poem that he himself was a believer in the doctrine of pre-existence, or intended to inculcate so vague a belief as a definite article of faith. But the origin of our primitive intuitions was always to him a subject of reverent wonder. As remarked in a previous chapter, it was the source of his unusual interest in the child mind, and gives a peculiar significance to most of the poems he grouped together as "Referring to the Period of Childhood." To his thought, in a very especial sense, the child is father of the man.

Pure ethical poetry is usually a weariness. Either it grows hortatory, and the song turns out a sermon, or it passes into the region of dry abstraction where the imagination can not live. The poets have always been fain to borrow for it the adornments of sense and passion. Even Shelley, who carried to an extreme the devotion to abstract idea, was forced to swathe his high and tenuous conceptions of justice and liberty in a vaporous robe of beautiful sensation. But in the other two poems of this great ethical group, the *Ode to Duty* and *The Happy Warrior,* Wordsworth turns an eye of steadfast contemplation inward, directly upon the central

truths of our being. It is Wordsworth and Wordsworth only who can make us feel the power or charm of a moral law in its sheer naked simplicity. Where else in English poetry will you find, in equal compass, so truthful and so sublime a statement of the origin, nature, and demands of Duty? Wordsworth holds our thought before this

Stern daughter of the Voice of God

until we feel the awful yet uplifting truth that the Power which speaks within our hearts is the very same that doth preserve the stars from wrong, through Whom the most ancient heavens are fresh and strong. In simple austere majesty this Ode is an example of Wordsworth's very best manner.

ODE TO DUTY

Stern Daughter of the Voice of God!
O Duty! if that name thou love
Who art a light to guide, a rod
To check the erring, and reprove;
Thou, who art victory and law
When empty terrors overawe;
From vain temptations dost set free;
And calm'st the weary strife of frail humanity!

There are who ask not if thine eye
Be on them; who, in love and truth,
Where no misgiving is, rely
Upon the genial sense of youth:

Glad Hearts! without reproach or blot;
Who do thy work, and know it not:
Oh! if through confidence misplaced
They fail, thy saving arms, dread Power! around
them cast.

Serene will be our days and bright,
And happy will our nature be,
When love is an unerring light,
And joy its own security.
And they a blissful course may hold
Even now, who, not unwisely bold,
Live in the spirit of this creed;
Yet seek thy firm support, according to their need.

I, loving freedom, and untried;
No sport of every random gust,
Yet being to myself a guide,
Too blindly have reposed my trust:
And oft, when in my heart was heard
Thy timely mandate, I deferred
The task, in smoother walks to stray;
But thee I now would serve more strictly, if I may.

Through no disturbance of my soul,
Or strong compunction in me wrought,
I supplicate for thy control;
But in the quietness of thought:
Me this unchartered freedom tires;
I feel the weight of chance-desires:
My hopes no more must change their name,
I long for a repose that ever is the same.

Stern Lawgiver! yet thou dost wear
The Godhead's most benignant grace;
Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon thy face:
Flowers laugh before thee on their beds
And fragrance in thy footing treads;
Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong;
And the most ancient heavens, through Thee,
are fresh and strong.

To humbler functions, awful Power!
I call thee: I myself commend
Unto thy guidance from this hour;
Oh, let my weakness have an end!
Give unto me, made lowly wise,
The spirit of self-sacrifice;
The confidence of reason give;
And in the light of truth thy Bondman let me live!

The Happy Warrior is a portrait of duty embodied in heroic character. When the poem was first published in 1807, Lord Nelson was the hero of the hour in the thought of all Englishmen, and some traits in the character of Wordsworth's warrior may have been suggested by him; but his relations with Lady Hamilton made it impossible for Wordsworth to think of him with satisfaction in connection with the idea of what a warrior ought to be. The person most prominent in Wordsworth's mind as the model for his hero, and who would seem to have come

near to realizing the idea of a man of action, was his brother John, who was captain of an East Indianman and perished in shipwreck in 1805. The poem is severely plain in style, but it shows in every line a profound insight into the way in which moral character is formed and nurtured. Harriet Martineau once told Wordsworth that of all his poems Doctor Channing liked best *The Happy Warrior;* to which the old poet replied, "O, aye, that was not on account of the *poetic conditions* being best fulfilled in that poem, but because it is (solemnly) a chain of extremely valooable thoughts." It is a chain of extremely valuable thoughts; but Wordsworth hardly did justice to its distinctly poetic value. These thoughts wear a stately halo of emotion, and any attempts at adornment would have lessened their stern majesty of manner. To set the bare facts of our moral nature in a light which irradiates but does not disguise them, this surely is to conform to "poetic conditions."

THE HAPPY WARRIOR

Who is the happy Warrior? Who is he
That every man in arms should wish to be?
—It is the generous Spirit, who, when brought
Among the tasks of real life, hath wrought
Upon the plan that pleased his boyish thought:

Whose high endeavours are an inward light
That makes the path before him always bright:
Who, with a natural instinct to discern
What knowledge can perform, is diligent to learn;
Abides by this resolve, and stops not there,
But makes his moral being his prime care;
Who, doomed to go in company with Pain,
And Fear, and Bloodshed, miserable train!
Turns his necessity to glorious gain;
In face of these doth exercise a power
Which is our human nature's highest dower;
Controls them and subdues, transmutes, bereaves
Of their bad influence, and their good receives:
By objects, which might force the soul to abate
Her feeling, rendered more compassionate;
Is placable—because occasions rise
So often that demand such sacrifice;
More skilful in self-knowledge, even more pure,
As tempted more; more able to endure,
As more exposed to suffering and distress;
Thence, also, more alive to tenderness.
—'Tis he whose law is reason; who depends
Upon that law as on the best of friends;
Whence, in a state where men are tempted still
To evil for a guard against worse ill,
And what in quality or act is best
Doth seldom on a right foundation rest,
He labours good on good to fix, and owes
To virtue every triumph that he knows:
—Who, if he rise to station of command,
Rises by open means; and there will stand
On honourable terms, or else retire,
And in himself possess his own desire;

Who comprehends his trust, and to the same
Keeps faithful with a singleness of aim;
And therefore does not stoop, nor lie in wait
For wealth, or honours, or for worldly state;
Whom they must follow; on whose head must fall,
Like showers of manna, if they come at all:
Whose powers shed round him in the common strife,
Or mild concerns of ordinary life,
A constant influence, a peculiar grace;
But who, if he be called upon to face
Some awful moment to which Heaven has joined
Great issues, good or bad for human kind,
Is happy as a Lover; and attired
With sudden brightness, like a Man inspired;
And, through the heat of conflict, keeps the law
In calmness made, and sees what he foresaw;
Or if an unexpected call succeed,
Come when it will, is equal to the need:
—He who, though thus endued as with a sense
And faculty for storm and turbulence,
Is yet a Soul whose master-bias leans
To homefelt pleasures and to gentle scenes;
Sweet images! which, wheresoe'er he be,
Are at his heart; and such fidelity
It is his darling passion to approve;
More brave for this, that he hath much to love:—
'Tis, finally, the Man, who, lifted high,
Conspicuous object in a Nation's eye,
Or left unthought-of in obscurity,—
Who, with a toward or untoward lot,
Prosperous or adverse, to his wish or not—
Plays, in the many games of life, that one
Where what he most doth value must be won:

Whom neither shape of danger can dismay,
Nor thought of tender happiness betray;
Who, not content that former worth stand fast,
Looks forward, persevering to the last,
From well to better, daily self-surpast:
Who, whether praise of him must walk the earth
For ever, and to noble deeds give birth,
Or he must fall, to sleep without his fame,
And leave a dead unprofitable name—
Finds comfort in himself and in his cause;
And, while the mortal mist is gathering, draws
His breath in confidence of Heaven's applause:
This is the happy Warrior; this is He
That every Man in arms should wish to be.

In these three poems may be read Wordsworth's philosophy of life. He assumes as the basis of his thinking a Supreme Intelligence whom we must think of as benevolent; whose presence is felt in all the sublimity and beauty of nature; and whose mandates are heard as the voice of conscience in the human heart. This assumption is justified by primitive convictions which we can neither explain nor deny, but which

. . . be they what they may
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,

and without which we can have no authoritative moral judgments. Even in his early life, this be-

lief in some Supreme Benevolent Power underlay, more or less consciously, as we have seen, all Wordsworth's thinking. It was subtly associated in his imagination, from his boyhood, with the steadfast strength of the hills and the solemn ongoings of the heavens.

> Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe!
> Thou Soul that art the eternity of Thought!
> And giv'st to forms and images a breath
> And everlasting motion!

It is hardly exaggeration to say that he spent all his days thereafter in contemplation of the presence and influence of this Supreme Power as seen in the face of Nature and in the lives of men. After 1800 his life was almost purely meditative. He had no active occupation, no formal studies, no amusements or recreations. He had very few intimate friends, and the best of them—like the Lambs—he saw but seldom. He found his pleasure mostly alone and out-of-door, watching the ever varying charm of Nature with its infinite wealth of suggestion, or in contemplation of the primal truths of common life that are independent of custom and convention. One gathers from his poetry and letters that he would not allow himself to be much

worried by the cares of life, or much puzzled by its problems. He was not always making futile guesses of this unintelligible world. He made himself content

> With a few strong instincts and a few plain rules.

His prevailing temper was a serene and thoughtful optimism. In the face of all the ills and all the sorrows of life he maintains a calm confidence in goodness, a certain high benignity of soul. Doubtless this was in part temperamental. He was by nature not restless and eager, but self-contained. His temper may have been stubborn, but it was not impetuous. Even in the period of his early disappointment over the collapse of the French Revolution, he would not give way to cynicism or despair, nor bear over Europe the pageant of his bleeding heart. There was not a drop of Byronic blood in his veins. He knew his temper in those days to be unhealthy, and waited till he had recovered from it instead of striving to utter it in verse.

Doubtless this steadfast self-control may have diminished the popular attractions of his poetry. It may be that

> The gods approve
> The depth, and not the tumult of the Soul,

but it is to be feared that the average reader of poetry reverses the preference. Yet it is just this moral poise, this habit of calm contemplation refusing to be swayed by passion or biased by prejudice, that gives to Wordsworth's poetry its lasting and sanative power. It is true that some of his critics thought that his isolation and self-absorption narrowed his sympathies and limited his knowledge of life to the region of Wordsworthshire. Mr. Carlyle, though he respected the wholesome rustic good sense of the old poet, pronounced his "divine reflections and unfathomabilities" rather "palish and uncertain." But if the range of Wordsworth's outer experience was not wide, it is to be remembered that the most profound truths of our moral nature are not to be learned in the market place, but in the quiet of contemplation. His outward life was uneventful; but his inner life was not meager. He had known those experiences of hope and disappointment, of joy and sorrow, of love and loss, by which the soul tests its deepest beliefs. And out of all these experiences he had wrought a steadfast optimism. Assuredly he is the most healthy poet of his generation. That can not be the sanest or greatest poetry which utters merely an unsatisfied

longing, however poignant, but leaves us restless and morbid, as Byron's does, or gasping in vague impassioned desire after we know not what, as much of Shelley's does. Wordsworth's calms and elevates, and gives us some assurance of a central peace subsisting at the heart of all agitations.

It is true that Wordsworth's poetic power began to decline after about 1810. Mr. Matthew Arnold, as we have seen, declares that almost all his first-class work was produced in the decade between 1798 and 1808. The homiletic passages of *The Excursion,* in particular, give him positive pain:

"One can hear them being quoted at a Social Science Congress; one can call up the whole scene. A great room in one of our dismal provincial towns; dusty air and jaded afternoon twilight: benches full of men with bald heads and women in spectacles: an orator lifting up his face from a manuscript written within and without to declaim these lines of Wordsworth; and in the soul of any poor child of nature who may have wandered in thither, an unutterable sense of lamentation, mourning, and woe!"

Ever since Jeffrey wrote his wrong-headed review

in the *Edinburgh,* beginning "This will never do," it has been common to regard *The Excursion* as an unreadable poem. Yet one need not be a very bigoted Wordsworthian to enjoy it. There are, indeed, passages of reflection upon political or economic themes, especially in the later books of the poem, which we may surrender to Mr. Arnold's indignation; but the narrative and descriptive parts are generally excellent. Some books are excellent throughout. The Sixth Book, for example, in which the pastor tells the story of some of his humble parishioners, I should think an excellent test of a reader's ability to enjoy much that is most characteristic in Wordsworth's work. Short passages of dulness there may be; but as we read, the scene shapes itself before our inner eye; we take our place in the cloud-haunted mountain valley beside the solemn Grasmere church, the pensive Rothay murmuring by; and as we listen to the grave discourse upon life and death, the calm sanctities of the mountain solitudes descend upon our spirit—as Charles Lamb said, "It is like a day in heaven."

It is true that after about 1810 Wordsworth's poetry was concerned more largely with moral themes; and that his thought, no less true and profound, tends too often to pass into abstract or dis-

cursive forms, and can not so readily embody itself before the imagination. Yet such poems as *Laodamia, Dion,* the *Vernal Ode,* the *Ode to Lycoris, The Longest Day,* all written between 1814 and 1820, are among the work of Wordsworth which we could least afford to spare. They have lost something of the freshness and buoyancy of youth, doubtless; but in their solemnity of thought and placid elevation of feeling they are unsurpassed in meditative poetry. The *Laodamia,* written in 1815, when he was reviewing with his son his own early classical reading, is a noble expression of that high, enduring love which transcends all earthly passion.

LAODAMIA

"With sacrifice before the rising morn
Vows have I made by fruitless hope inspired;
And from the infernal Gods, 'mid shades forlorn
Of night, my slaughtered Lord have I required:
Celestial pity I again implore;—
Restore him to my sight—great Jove, restore!"

So speaking, and by fervent love endowed
With faith, the Suppliant heavenward lifts her hands;
While, like the sun emerging from a cloud,
Her countenance brightens—and her eye expands;
Her bosom heaves and spreads, her stature grows;
And she expects the issue in repose.

O terror! what hath she perceived?—O joy!
What doth she look on?—whom doth she behold?
Her Hero slain upon the beach of Troy?
His vital presence? his corporeal mould?
It is—if sense deceive her not—'tis He!
And a God leads him, wingèd Mercury!

Mild Hermes spake—and touched her with his wand
That calms all fear; "Such grace hath crowned thy prayer,
Laodamía! that at Jove's command
Thy Husband walks the paths of upper air:
He comes to tarry with thee three hours' space;
Accept the gift, behold him face to face!"

Forth sprang the impassioned Queen her Lord to clasp,
Again that consummation she essayed;
But unsubstantial Form eludes her grasp
As often as that eager grasp was made.
The Phantom parts—but parts to reunite,
And reassume his place before her sight.

"Protesiláus, lo! thy guide is gone!
Confirm, I pray, the vision with thy voice:
This is our palace,—yonder is thy throne;
Speak, and the floor thou tread'st on will rejoice.
Not to appal me have the gods bestowed
This precious boon; and blest a sad abode."

"Great Jove, Laodamía! doth not leave
His gifts imperfect:—Spectre though I be,
I am not sent to scare thee or deceive;
But in reward of thy fidelity.
And something also did my worth obtain;
For fearless virtue bringeth boundless gain,

"Thou knowest, the Delphic oracle foretold
That the first Greek who touched the Trojan strand
Should die; but me the threat could not withhold:
A generous cause a victim did demand;
And forth I leapt upon the sandy plain;
A self-devoted chief—by Hector slain."

"Supreme of Heroes—bravest, noblest, best!
Thy matchless courage I bewail no more,
Which then, when tens of thousands were deprest
By doubt, propelled thee to the fatal shore;
Thou found'st—and I forgive thee—here thou art—
A nobler counsellor than my poor heart.

"But thou, though capable of sternest deed,
Wert kind as resolute, and good as brave;
And he, whose power restores thee, hath decreed
Thou should'st elude the malice of the grave:
Redundant are thy locks, thy lips as fair
As when their breath enriched Thessalian air.

"No Spectre greets me,—no vain Shadow this;
Come, blooming Hero, place thee by my side!
Give, on this well-known couch, one nuptial kiss
To me, this day, a second time thy bride!"
Jove frowned in heaven: the conscious Parcæ threw
Upon those roseate lips a Stygian hue.

"This visage tells thee that my doom is past:
Nor should the change be mourned, even if the joys
Of sense were able to return as fast
And surely as they vanish. Earth destroys
Those raptures duly—Erebus disdains:
Calm pleasures there abide—majestic pains.

"Be taught, O faithful Consort, to control
Rebellious passion: for the Gods approve
The depth, and not the tumult, of the soul;
A fervent, not ungovernable, love.
Thy transports moderate; and meekly mourn
When I depart, for brief is my sojourn—"

"Ah, wherefore?—did not Hercules by force
Wrest from the guardian Monster of the tomb
Alcestis, a reanimated corse,
Given back to dwell on earth in vernal bloom?
Medea's spells dispersed the weight of years,
And Æson stood a youth 'mid youthful peers.

"The Gods to us are merciful—and they
Yet further may relent: for mightier far
Than strength of nerve and sinew, or the sway
Of magic potent over sun and star,
Is love, though oft to agony distrest,
And though his favourite seat be feeble woman's breast.

"But if thou goest, I follow—" "Peace!" he said,—
She looked upon him and was calmed and cheered;
The ghastly colour from his lips had fled;
In his deportment, shape, and mien, appeared
Elysian beauty, melancholy grace,
Brought from a pensive though a happy place.

He spake of love, such love as Spirits feel
In worlds whose course is equable and pure;
No fears to beat away—no strife to heal—
The past unsighed for, and the future sure;
Spake of heroic arts in graver mood
Revived, with finer harmony pursued;

Of all that is most beauteous—imaged there
In happier beauty; more pellucid streams,
An ampler ether, a diviner air,
And fields invested with purpureal gleams;
Climes which the sun, who sheds the brightest day
Earth knows, is all unworthy to survey.

Yet there the Soul shall enter which hath earned
That privilege by virtue.—"Ill," said he,
"The end of man's existence I discerned,
Who from ignoble games and revelry
Could draw, when we had parted, vain delight,
While tears were thy best pastime, day and night;

"And while my youthful peers before my eyes
(Each hero following his peculiar bent)
Prepared themselves for glorious enterprise
By martial sports,—or, seated in the tent,
Chieftains and kings in council were detained;
What time the fleet at Aulis lay enchained.

"The wished-for wind was given:—I then revolved
The oracle, upon the silent sea;
And, if no worthier led the way, resolved
That, of a thousand vessels, mine should be
The foremost prow in pressing to the strand,—
Mine the first blood that tinged the Trojan sand.

"Yet bitter, oft-times bitter, was the pang
When of thy loss I thought, beloved Wife!
On thee too fondly did my memory hang,
And on the joys we shared in mortal life,—
The paths which we had trod—these fountains, flowers,
My new-planned cities, and unfinished towers.

"But should suspense permit the Foe to cry,
'Behold they tremble!—haughty their array,
Yet of their number no one dares to die?'
In soul I swept the indignity away:
Old frailties then recurred:—but lofty thought,
In act embodied, my deliverance wrought.

"And thou, though strong in love, art all too weak
In reason, in self-government too slow;
I counsel thee by fortitude to seek
Our blest reunion on the shades below.
The invisible world with thee hath sympathised;
By thy affections raised and solemnised.

"Learn, by a mortal yearning, to ascend—
Seeking a higher object. Love was given,
Encouraged, sanctioned, chiefly for that end;
For this the passion to excess was driven—
That self might be annulled: her bondage prove
The fetters of a dream, opposed to love."—

Aloud she shrieked! for Hermes reappears!
Round the dear Shade she would have clung—'tis vain:
The hours are past—too brief had they been years;
And him no mortal effort can detain:
Swift, toward the realms that know not earthly day,
He through the portal takes his silent way,
And on the palace-floor a lifeless corse She lay.

Thus, all in vain exhorted and reproved,
She perished; and, as for a wilful crime,
By the just Gods whom no weak pity moved,
Was doomed to wear out her appointed time,
Apart from happy Ghosts, that gather flowers
Of blissful quiet 'mid unfading bowers.

—Yet tears to human suffering are due;
And mortal hopes defeated and o'erthrown
Are mourned by man, and not by man alone,
As fondly he believes.—Upon the side
Of Hellespont (such faith was entertained)
A knot of spiry trees for ages grew
From out the tomb of him for whom she died;
And ever, when such stature they had gained
That Ilium's walls were subject to their view,
The trees' tall summits withered at the sight;
A constant interchange of growth and blight![1]

Some of the nature poetry of these years, also, though without the eager penetrative imagination of his early work, has remarkable power to render the atmosphere of the scene and its essential emotional influence. In such poems as that beginning

Departing summer hath assumed
An aspect tenderly illumed

or that other one, written in the same September of 1819,

The sylvan slopes with corn-clad fields
Are hung,

[1] For the account of these long-lived trees, see Pliny's *Natural History*, lib. xvi. cap. 44; and for the features in the character of Protesilaus, see the *Iphigenia in Aulis* of Euripides. Virgil places the Shade of Laodamia in a mournful region, among unhappy Lovers,

"—His Laodamia
It comes.—"

the still autumnal landscape seems suffused with the peace of calm and ripening years.

But the most ardent lover of Wordsworth must admit a decline in his work after about 1820. His habit of life remained unchanged. He still lived mostly out-of-door, moving about in the little region where the last fifty years of his life were passed. But the imaginative interest in nature and the lives of humble folk out of which his best poetry had been made seemed to abate. His thought turned more frequently to larger and more general themes. His reflection gained upon his imagination. In spite of his isolation he had always watched closely the course of religious and economic changes in England, and now much of his later verse was concerned with these large public questions. As we have seen, the disappointment of his early political dreams had made him a rigid conservative, distrustful of all attempts to reform men in the mass. He looked with doubt upon the great Reform Bill of 1832, with positive disfavor upon any proposition for Catholic Emancipation. He was positively fearful of the popular demands which the Reform Bill incited, but could not satisfy, of those restless people who

> To the giddy top of self-esteem
> By flatterers caressed, mount into a dream
> Of boundless suffrage, at whose sage behest
> Justice shall rule, disorder be supprest,
> And every man sit down as Plenty's guest!
>
> *The Warning*, 124-129.

On the other hand, he was genuinely interested in any measures to alleviate the condition of the working classes. He saw clearly, and he saw early, the problems and the dangers that threatened English society in the growth of the new industrial system; the hardship and degradation of the herded operative class, on the one hand, and the growth of vulgar luxury on the other. He was one of the first to see and to state the necessity of some scheme of popular education. But his outlook upon economic and industrial conditions in England tended to dishearten him and to depress his imagination. The figure of the sodden operative or miner was in striking and saddening contrast with the sturdy independence of the humble and rustic folk of his early poetry. He could not imagine them in the surroundings in which he was wont to set his plain people. Their passions were not "incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature," nor were they "in hourly communication with those

objects from which the best part of language is derived." Quite the opposite of all that. Yet Wordsworth in his later years was too much of a conservative to be a reformer; he was always a little fearful that any definite measures, either of economic or educational reform might disturb the settled quiet of English domestic life. His verse on these subjects hardly ever shows the eager advocacy of the reformer, still less the impassioned imagination of the poet. He could only look upon the world with genuine sympathy, from the loopholes of retreat.

Much of his later work was thrown into sonnets. The sonnet was a poetic form especially congenial to him because of its fitness for the expression of detached moods of reflection or phases of feeling; and he very early gained such a mastery of it as none of his contemporaries could equal and none of his successors have surpassed. Some of the early sonnets are masterpieces of intensity of feeling and noble severity of form. Take, for example, this one, recording his solemn hush of spirit as he stood on Westminster bridge at daybreak, on a September morning of 1802.

> Earth has not anything to show more fair:
> Dull would he be of soul who could pass by

A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

The following sonnet, written two or three years later, is often quoted as embodying Wordsworth's conviction of a Spiritual Presence without which the world is dead and life barren.

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

In 1802, when, as he thought, the brief security from the peace of Amiens was lulling Englishmen into indifference to all noble ends, he wrote a group of sonnets unequaled by any in English since Milton's. No more ringing call to a higher national life was ever heard in English verse than in some of these sonnets. They are a proof that the disappointment of his early hopes for the revolution in France had not dimmed his high ideals of England's duty and mission.

LONDON, 1802

I

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

II

It is not to be thought of that the Flood
Of British freedom, which, to the open sea
Of the world's praise, from dark antiquity
Hath flowed, "with pomp of waters, unwithstood,"
Roused though it be full often to a mood
Which spurns the check of salutary bands,
That this most famous Stream in bogs and sands
Should perish; and to evil and to good
Be lost for ever. In our halls is hung
Armoury of the invincible Knights of old:
We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
Which Milton held.—In every thing we are sprung
Of Earth's first blood, have titles manifold.

COMPOSED BY THE SEA-SIDE, NEAR CALAIS,

AUGUST, 1802

Fair Star of evening, Splendour of the west,
Star of my Country!—on the horizon's brink
Thou hangest, stooping, as might seem, to sink
On England's bosom; yet well pleased to rest,
Meanwhile, and be to her a glorious crest
Conspicuous to the Nations. Thou, I think,
Should'st be my Country's emblem; and should'st wink,
Bright Star! with laughter on her banners, drest
In thy fresh beauty. There! that dusky spot
Beneath thee, that is England; there she lies.
Blessings be on you both! one hope, one lot,
One life, one glory!—I, with many a fear
For my dear Country, many heartfelt sighs,
Among men who do not love her, linger here.

ON THE EXTINCTION OF THE VENETIAN REPUBLIC

Once did She hold the gorgeous east in fee;
And was the safeguard of the west: the worth
Of Venice did not fall below her birth,
Venice, the eldest Child of Liberty.
She was a maiden City, bright and free;
No guile seduced, no force could violate;
And, when she took unto herself a Mate,
She must espouse the everlasting Sea.
And what if she had seen those glories fade,
Those titles vanish, and that strength decay;
Yet shall some tribute of regret be paid
When her long life hath reached its final day:
Men are we, and must grieve when even the Shade
Of that which once was great is passed away.

TO TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE

Toussaint, the most unhappy man of men!
Whether the whistling Rustic tend his plough
Within thy hearing, or thy head be now
Pillowed in some deep dungeon's earless den;—
O miserable Chieftain! where and when
Wilt thou find patience? Yet die not; do thou
Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:
Though fallen thyself, never to rise again,
Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man's unconquerable mind.

THOUGHT OF A BRITON ON THE SUBJUGATION OF SWITZERLAND

Two Voices are there; one is of the sea,
One of the mountains; each a mighty Voice:
In both from age to age thou didst rejoice,
They were thy chosen music, Liberty!
There came a Tyrant, and with holy glee
Thou fought'st against him; but hast vainly striven:
Thou from thy Alpine holds at length art driven,
Where not a torrent murmurs heard by thee.
Of one deep bliss thine ear hath been bereft:
Then cleave, O cleave to that which still is left;
For, high-souled Maid, what sorrow would it be
That Mountain floods should thunder as before,
And Ocean bellow from his rocky shore,
And neither awful Voice be heard by thee!

But that high voice was seldom heard in his later verse. Twenty-five years later, in 1827, in a sonnet called *Retirement,* he well expressed the mood—half discouragement and half apology—of those

Who shun the mischief which they cannot heal.

RETIREMENT

If the whole weight of what we think and feel,
Save only far as thought and feeling blend
With action, were as nothing, patriot Friend!
From thy remonstrance would be no appeal;
But to promote and fortify the weal
Of her own Being is her paramount end;
A truth which they alone shall comprehend
Who shun the mischief which they cannot heal.

Peace in these feverish times is sovereign bliss:
Here, with no thirst but what the stream can slake,
And startled only by the rustling brake,
Cool air I breathe; while the unincumbered Mind,
By some weak aims at services assigned
To gentle Natures, thanks not Heaven amiss.

In 1821 he began, and in the following years continued, a series of *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* on the history of the Church of England from the introduction of Christianity to the nineteenth century, each sonnet commemorating some noteworthy person or event in the long story. None of them can quite be called feeble or commonplace, many of them have a certain grave dignity befitting their theme: but in none of them is there much of the breath of genuine inspiration. They are the work of a loyal and pious churchman rather than of a great poet. Perhaps none of the series come nearer to Wordsworth's best manner than the three suggested by King's Chapel, Cambridge. Yet here is no longer the tense earnest voice of youth calling men to freedom and virtue; rather the calmer tone of later years resting secure upon the venerable sanctities of a national religion.

I

Tax not the royal Saint with vain expense,
With ill-matched aims the Architect who planned—

Albeit labouring for a scanty band
Of white-robed Scholars only—this immense
And glorious Work of fine intelligence!
Give all thou canst; high Heaven rejects the lore
Of nicely-calculated less or more;
So deemed the man who fashioned for the sense
These lofty pillars, spread that branching roof
Self-poised, and scooped into ten thousand cells,
Where light and shade repose, where music dwells
Lingering—and wandering on as loth to die;
Like thoughts whose very sweetness yieldeth proof
That they were born for immortality.

II

What awful perspective! while from our sight
With gradual stealth the lateral windows hide
Their Portraitures, their stone-work glimmers, dyed
In the soft chequerings of a sleepy light.
Martyr, or King, or sainted Eremite,
Whoe'er ye be, that thus, yourselves unseen,
Imbue your prison-bars with solemn sheen,
Shine on, until ye fade with coming Night!—
But, from the arms of silence—list! O list!
The music bursteth into second life;
The notes luxuriate, every stone is kissed
By sound, or ghost of sound, in mazy strife;
Heart-thrilling strains, that cast, before the eye
Of the devout, a veil of ecstasy!

III

They dreamt not of a perishable home
Who thus could build. Be mine, in hours of fear
Or grovelling thought, to seek a refuge here;
Or, through the aisles of Westminster to roam;

Where bubbles burst, and folly's dancing foam
Melts, if it cross the threshold; where the wreath
Of awe-struck wisdom droops: or let my path
Lead to that younger Pile, whose sky-like dome
Hath typified by reach of daring art
Infinity's embrace; whose guardian crest,
The silent Cross, among the stars shall spread
As now, when She hath also seen her breast
Filled with mementos, satiate with its part
Of grateful England's overflowing Dead.

This decline of imaginative power through the later years is perhaps least evident in his nature poetry. Early and late Wordsworth found in the external world the surest source of poetic feeling. Yet here, too, something of the early vision and faculty has gone. He has lost the freshness and surprise of an intimate sense of the life in nature. His imagination no longer penetrates to the heart of things and reveals their essential meaning. In 1820 he published a series of sonnets descriptive of various scenes and incidents in a tour through the picturesque valley of the River Duddon. In some of them there is a thrill of the old intense feeling in the presence of nature; but many record only a rather commonplace memory or reflection, while a few are baldly descriptive. By far the best is the *After Thought*, which closes the series.

I thought of Thee, my partner and my guide,
As being past away.—Vain sympathies!
For, backward, Duddon! as I cast my eyes,
I see what was, and is, and will abide;
Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide;
The Form remains, the Function never dies;
While we, the brave, the mighty, and the wise,
We Men, who in our morn of youth defied
The elements, must vanish;—be it so!
Enough, if something from our hands have power
To live, and act, and serve the future hour;
And if, as toward the silent tomb we go,
Through love, through hope, and faith's transcendent
dower,
We feel that we are greater than we know.

Wordsworth was fond of travel, and other series of poems—not all in sonnet form—record other tours, one in Germany and Switzerland in 1822, others in Scotland in 1831 and 1833, and a fourth in Italy in 1837. They are pleasing memorials of travel, full of the wise and placid enjoyment of a mature mind; but only now and then do they show a gleam of the old imaginative power. The title of the sonnet just quoted may well indicate the manner of all the best of Wordsworth's later poems of nature; they are "after thoughts" suggested by some natural scene or object. The poet dwells with something of the old brooding delight upon what

is before his eyes, until his thought passes insensibly from the object itself to some of its natural —though not inevitable—analogies. He does not so much interpret nature as moralize it. No poem will better illustrate this later manner than *The Primrose of the Rock,* 1831. The flower is first described with a kind of lingering fondness, and then the poet turns to serious contemplation of the larger truth the life of the flower suggests.

THE PRIMROSE OF THE ROCK

A Rock there is whose homely front
  The passing traveller slights;
Yet there the glow-worms hang their lamps,
  Like stars, at various heights;
And one coy Primrose to that Rock
  The vernal breeze invites.

What hideous warfare hath been waged,
  What kingdoms overthrown,
Since first I spied that Primrose-tuft
  And marked it for my own;
A lasting link in Nature's chain
  From highest heaven let down!

The flowers, still faithful to the stems,
  Their fellowship renew;
The stems are faithful to the root,
  That worketh out of view;
And to the rock the root adheres
  In every fibre true.

Close clings to earth the living rock,
  Though threatening still to fall;
The earth is constant to her sphere;
  And God upholds them all:
So blooms this lonely Plant, nor dreads
  Her annual funeral.

. . . . . .

Here closed the meditative strain;
  But air breathed soft that day,
The hoary mountain-heights were cheered,
  The sunny vale looked gay;
And to the Primrose of the Rock
  I gave this after-lay.

I sang—Let myriads of bright flowers,
  Like Thee, in field and grove
Revive unenvied;—mightier far,
  Than tremblings that reprove
Our vernal tendencies to hope,
  Is God's redeeming love;

That love which changed—for wan disease,
  For sorrow that had bent
O'er hopeless dust, for withered age—
  Their moral element,
And turned the thistles of a curse
  To types beneficent.

Sin-blighted though we are, we too,
  The reasoning Sons of Men,
From one oblivious winter called
  Shall rise, and breathe again;
And in eternal summer lose
  Our threescore years and ten.

To humbleness of heart descends
  This prescience from on high,
The faith that elevates the just,
  Before and when they die;
And makes each soul a separate heaven,
  A court for Deity.

The first four stanzas are not unlike some of Wordsworth's early poems, to the daisy or the celandine, though in a more "meditative strain"; but the lesson of the "after-lay," though natural, is, we feel, purely subjective reflection, and not the essential meaning of the flower.

The two familiar poems on the *Skylark* well illustrate Wordsworth's change of manner. In the first, written in 1805, he identifies himself for the moment with the young and soaring joy of the bird.

Up with me! up with me into the clouds!
  For thy song, Lark, is strong;
Up with me, up with me into the clouds!
    Singing, singing,
With clouds and sky about thee ringing,
  Lift me, guide me, till I find
That spot which seems so to thy mind!

I have walked through wildernesses dreary,
And to-day my heart is weary;
Had I now the wings of a Faery,
Up to thee would I fly.

There is madness about thee, and joy divine
In that song of thine;
Lift me, guide me, high and high
To thy banqueting place in the sky.

Joyous as morning,
Thou art laughing and scorning;
Thou hast a nest for thy love and thy rest,
And, though little troubled with sloth,
Drunken Lark! thou wouldst be loth
To be such a traveller as I.

Happy, happy Liver,
With a soul as strong as a mountain river
Pouring out praise to the almighty Giver,
Joy and jollity be with us both!

Alas! my journey, rugged and uneven,
Through prickly moors or dusty ways must wind;
But hearing thee, or others of thy kind,
As full of gladness and as free of heaven,
I, with my fate contented, will plod on,
And hope for higher raptures, when life's day is done.

In the exquisite little poem of 1827, the bird dropping suddenly from the sky into his nest, is a

Type of the wise who soar but never roam;
True to the kindred points of heaven and home!

The last couplet evidently forms the motive of the poem.

Ethereal minstrel! pilgrim of the sky!
Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?
Or, while the wings aspire, are heart and eyes
Both with thy nest upon the dewy ground?

Thy nest which thou canst drop into at will,
Those quivering wings composed, that music still!

Leave to the nightingale her shady wood;
A privacy of glorious light is thine;
Whence thou dost pour upon the world a flood
Of harmony, with instinct more divine;
Type of the wise who soar, but never roam;
True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home!

But after all, every lover of Wordsworth must be more than half inclined to retract any criticism he may have made upon these later nature poems. They are almost never merely commonplace. And if the ripened experience of the poet is a little over-prone in those maturer years to find some lesson of life in any object he sees, and to make his poem rather thoughtful than imaginative, yet he has a serene wisdom, a deep and placid faith, which compensates for the loss of youthful buoyancy and imaginative power. Indeed there are many readers to whom such poems as the *Devotional Incitements* and the *Evening Voluntaries* will always be among the most precious specimens of Wordsworth's work. Thus should a great poet grow old. Not with weakness, complaint, or fretfulness, but with calm benignity and steadfast aspiration; as passing, not into any valley of shadows, but to the clearer light of the

great uplands of life. And to the end, as at the beginning, it was the common face of Nature that could best teach him the highest truth or stir the deepest feeling. His days had been, as he wished,

Bound each to each by natural piety.

In the very last years of his life some of his most genuinely inspired verse was written to the clouds that drifted over Nab Scar,[1] or to the shadow cast by a daisy upon a stone at the roadside.

So fair, so sweet, withal so sensitive,
Would that the little Flowers were born to live,
Conscious of half the pleasure which they give;

That to this mountain-daisy's self were known
The beauty of its star-shaped shadow, thrown
On the smooth surface of this naked stone!

And what if hence a bold desire should mount
High as the Sun, that he could take account
Of all that issues from his glorious fount!

So might he ken how by his sovereign aid
These delicate companionships are made;
And how he rules the pomp of light and shade;

And were the Sister-power that shines by night
So privileged, what a countenance of delight
Would through the clouds break forth on human sight!

[1] *To the Clouds*, 1842.

Fond fancies! wheresoe'er shall turn thine eye
On earth, air, ocean, or the starry sky,
Converse with Nature in pure sympathy;

All vain desires, all lawless wishes quelled,
Be Thou to love and praise alike impelled,
Whatever boon is granted or withheld.

Better still are those lines—among the very latest he ever wrote—suggested by the sound of this stream, whose soothing nightly voice had been familiar to him for half a century.

The unremitting voice of nightly streams
That wastes so oft, we think, its tuneful powers,
If neither soothing to the worm that gleams
Through dewy grass, nor small birds hushed in bowers,
Nor unto silent leaves and drowsy flowers,—
That voice of unpretending harmony
(For who what is shall measure by what seems
To be, or not to be,
Or tax high Heaven with prodigality?)
Wants not a healing influence that can creep
Into the human breast, and mix with sleep
To regulate the motion of our dreams
For kindly issues—as through every clime
Was felt near murmuring brooks in earliest time;
As at this day, the rudest swains who dwell
Where torrents roar, or hear the tinkling knell
Of water-breaks, with grateful heart could tell.

CHAPTER IX

THE LATEST YEARS

IT was the peculiar hardship of Wordsworth's career that he began to obtain wide recognition for his poetry only when his poetical power began to decline. The indifference of the public to *The Excursion,* which he thought the most valuable of all his works, and the savage and ignorant attack of Jeffrey upon it in the *Edinburgh,* though they could not change his high conviction of his message as a poet, must have been a disappointment. He never again ventured upon a poem of such dimensions, and soon gave up hope of completing those two other parts which, combined with *The Excursion,* should form a great philosophical poem. Of one of the two poems, *The Recluse,* only about a hundred lines were written; the other does not seem to have been begun at all. The earlier and better long poem, *The Prelude,* the record of the years of struggle and development, though practically finished as

early as 1809, he could never bring himself to publish, but left it in manuscript at his death. A complete edition of the *Poems* in two volumes issued in 1815, gave evidence that the circle of his readers was slowly widening. But very slowly. Neither the *White Doe of Rylstone,* 1815—which Jeffrey, having damned *The Excursion* the year before, now pronounced "the worst poem ever imprinted in a quarto volume"—nor the *Peter Bell,* which Wordsworth had kept by him for nearly twenty years and ventured to publish in 1819, nor the *Duddon Sonnets* of 1820, could have gained him very many new readers. Another edition of the collected *Poems* was issued in 1820, this time in four volumes; but the cautious publisher did not print more than five hundred copies; and that number seems to have satisfied the demand of the public until 1827.

Yet throughout this decade from 1820 to 1830, it was becoming evident that in spite of flippant and malicious criticism, Wordsworth's place in the hierarchy of great English poets was to be secure. The company of his steadfast admirers included not only the early friends like Coleridge and Southey, who had been committed to him from his youth, but most of that group of younger essayists and critics who

now had the ear of the public, Lamb, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Wilson, Crabbe, Robinson, Talfourd. Byron had dominated popular sentiment for a dozen years; but the public was now beginning to tire of his loud and half-affected melancholy and defiance. The circle of Wordsworth's readers, on the contrary, was steadily increasing among the more thoughtful classes, in the universities, in the church, as well as among profound men of letters; and it was noticeable that those who once learned to appreciate his work, never changed their estimate of it. Hazlitt, who was, in spite of a certain vein of perversity, the ablest literary critic of the time, wrote in 1825:

"Mr. Wordsworth's philosophic poetry, with a less glowing aspect and less tumult in the veins than Lord Byron on similar occasions, bends a calmer and keener eye on mortality; the impression, if less vivid, is more pleasing and permanent; and we confess it (perhaps it is a want of taste and proper feeling) that there are lines and poems of our author's that we think of ten times for once that we recur to any of Lord Byron's. . . . It may be considered as characteristic of our poet's writings, that they either make no impression on the mind at all, seem mere

nonsense verses, or that they leave a mark behind them that never wears out. They either

Fall blunted from the indurated breast

without any perceptible result, or they absorb it like a passion."

In those years there were many thoughtful young men like John Stuart Mill, who, reading Wordsworth for the first time in 1828, found in his verse a culture of the feelings such as no other contemporary poetry could afford. "In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings; which had no connection with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical and social conditions of mankind. . . . I needed to be made to feel that there was real permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation. Wordsworth taught me this, not only without turning away from, but with a greatly increased interest in, the common feelings and common destiny of human beings."

By 1832, when Scott and Byron and Shelley and Keats were all gone, it was universally admitted not only that Wordsworth was the greatest living

poet, but that, although he could never be a popular poet, his fame was quite as secure as that of any one of the great group of singers who had just passed off the stage. The day had long passed when any critic would venture to speak of him with indifference or contempt. The appreciation of his work if tardy, was intelligent and hearty when it did come. In the last twenty-five years of his life, no fewer than six editions of his *Complete Poems* were published in England, and three or four in America. He wrote to Crabbe Robinson, with great satisfaction, in 1836, "What do you think of an edition of twenty thousand of my poems being struck off in Boston!" More formal public honors were not wanting. In 1839 the University of Oxford conferred upon him the degree of D. C. L. The eloquent address of Commendation was made by his warm friend and admirer, Keble, then Professor of Poetry in Oxford, and the enthusiasm as the old poet appeared in the Sheldonian Theater to receive his honor was unprecedented. Three years later, 1842, he was granted a pension of three hundred pounds by Sir Robert Peel, and when, in the next year, the position of Poet Laureate was vacated by the death of Southey, it was instantly rec-

ognized that the honor could be conferred upon no one but Wordsworth.

Such honors were all the more grateful that they had come unsought, and were purely the recognition of his work as a poet. Never man had less itch for personal celebrity. He passed a whole half century in quiet isolation among his hills, avoiding all publicity, and refusing to abate one jot or tittle of his opinions in order to court popular applause. On the contrary, he doubtless seemed sometimes to carry this stubborn consistency almost over the bounds of courtesy. A certain native rusticity and independence of manner had been too much strengthened by the opposition he had encountered in all his early years. The contempt or indifference of the public had forced him to defend the genuineness of his inspiration until defense had unfortunately become the habit of his life. The temperate self-confidence which is always a trait of genius, provoked by persistent attacks, seemed sometimes likely to outlive all other traits. It was a just criticism upon him in his later years that he was a little too prone to assert his own opinions with a grave finality which allowed no dissent. As Tom Moore —who met him once or twice in London—said truly

enough: "He is a man who does not understand the give and take of conversation." Or, as Hazlitt, with his gift of phrase, puts it: "His standard of poetry is high and severe, almost to exclusiveness. He admits of nothing below, scarcely of anything above, himself." He certainly did take himself very seriously. Visitors who called upon him in those later years found him more ready to talk of his own poetry than of anything else, and were sometimes surprised, as Emerson was, to hear him repeat long passages from it with a kind of glad solemnity of manner. He occasionally ventured in grave complacency striking comparative estimates of the value of his work. To a friend who had mentioned *Lycidas* as the finest elegiac poem in the language, he replied, "You are not far wrong. It may, I think, be affirmed that Milton's *Lycidas* and my *Laodamia* are twin immortals." Mr. Carlyle from an evening's conversation with him, gathered the impression that "of transcendental and unlimited there was, to this critic, probably but one specimen known, Wordsworth himself! He by no means said so or hinted so, in words; but on the whole it was all I gathered from him in this considerable tête-à-tête of ours."

In all this there was no real boastfulness; only a blunt, ingenuous frankness. In fact it is the verdict of posterity that, on the whole, he did not much exaggerate the lasting value of his own poetry, and that he saw very clearly on what special qualities that value depends. But his taste was never catholic. He always showed singular inability to appreciate in others those gifts of which he had himself no mastery. Thus though he had a liking for Spenser's *Faery Queen*—probably on account of its intense moral purpose—he cared little for any other romantic poetry. Byron, of course, repelled him by his cynical misanthropy and restless license; but, as we have seen, he could declare that the poetry of Scott "had nothing for the immortal part of man," and pronounced the exuberant *Endymion* of of Keats, "a pretty paganism." He had the highest regard for Southey as a man; but had little patience with his *Kehamas* and *Thalabas* and all the brood of oriental romance. Even *The Ancient Mariner* of Coleridge seemed to him too extravagant, and the *Christabel* he thought "indelicate." There is no evidence, so far as I am aware, that he gave any cordial or appreciative recognition to the two new romantic poets who were producing some of their best work

during the last two decades of his life, Tennyson and Browning. As late as 1846, on hearing of the marriage of Browning and Miss Barrett, he makes the ungracious comment: "Doubtless they will speak more intelligibly to each other than they have yet done to the public." In contemporary European literature he took little interest. Goethe, the central figure in the world of letters for half a century, he always thought an overrated man. The *Faust* he professed himself unable to read; the *Wilhelm Meister* he would not read—it was "full of all manner of fornication." All of which proves only that the circle in which his imaginative sympathies moved, though lofty, was narrow. The very intensity of his conviction of a mission to produce a new type of poetry made him indifferent to all literature appealing to a different motive. But we must not expect all gifts united in one man; and we may well be thankful to the poet who felt more deeply than any of his contemporaries the power of the primal moral intuitions and the meanings and mystery to be read in the common face of nature.

The home life of Wordsworth at Rydal Mount, in the later years, was one of almost ideal serenity. Not that he had lapsed into any inactivity of mind

or imagination; not until the very end of life would he think of himself as retired or superannuated. Still less did he withdraw into any selfish indifference to wider public affairs. Quite the contrary. To an American visitor, in 1833, he declared with emphasis that for all his life he had given twelve hours' thought to the condition and prospects of society for every one hour given to poetry. His interest in the course of English politics was never keener than in the thirties and forties. The disappointment of his early political enthusiasms had made him mistrustful of all measures of legislative reform; but that mistrust only made him the more watchful of the tendencies in English public life. "The evils that he foresees from this dreadful Reform Bill," wrote his daughter in 1831, "quite weigh his spirit down"; and she was glad to get him into Scotland for a walking tour which might "drown his political thoughts and feelings for a time in his poetical ones." The events of the next ten or fifteen years, the movement for the repeal of the Corn Laws, the Chartist agitation, the wide-spread discontent among the laboring class, all gave him grave concern for the cause of ordered liberty and religion in England, and found expression now and then in

querulousness and irritation quite foreign to his usual temper.

Yet such outside causes of disquietude could not, one thinks, much disturb the settled peace of Wordsworth's domestic life. His household ties grew closer and dearer, as such ties always should, with the advancing years. Mrs. Wordsworth we see but seldom in the records of his earlier married life. While by no means without appreciation of her husband's genius and genuine sympathy with his ambitions, she could not share his poetic life so fully as did his sister Dorothy; yet from the day of her marriage through all the years thereafter she was the presiding genius of his household. Calm, thoughtful, reserved, with a certain gracious mastery of the practical concerns of daily life, she was admirably fitted to be the wife of such a man as William Wordsworth. Year by year she justified more fully the tribute in the closing lines of his familiar portrait of her.

> The reason firm, the temperate will,
> Endurance, foresight, strength and skill;
> A perfect woman nobly planned
> To warn, to comfort, and command;
> And yet a spirit still, and bright
> With something of angelic light.

When the long illness that clouded the last period of Dorothy Wordsworth's life rendered her active companionship with her brother no longer possible, Mrs. Wordsworth drew still closer to her husband's side. She became his amanuensis, adviser, helper in all things. From first to last, no one understood his nature, its strength and its weakness, so thoroughly as she did. We may get in her letters occasional glimpses of the tactful and kindly fashion with which she drew him out of his self-absorption, and checked his tendency to an over-estimate of his own work and a resentment of unappreciative criticism. But she rendered her husband a service far richer and more helpful than that. The lines he addressed to her after some twenty years of married life show how he had come to lean upon her steadfast love and faith. Wordsworth was not prone to utter his own deepest affections in verse, and he wrote only two poems* to his wife; but these later lines, though less familiar than the early poem, most readers will pronounce far more tender, more filled with the sense of absolute dependence upon a long tried affection.

* The stanzas beginning

"Let other bards of angels sing"

were probably addressed to his wife; if so, they make a third.

O dearer far than light and life are dear,
Full oft our human foresight I deplore;
Trembling, through my unworthiness, with fear
That friends, by death disjoined, may meet no more!

Misgivings, hard to vanquish or control,
Mix with the day, and cross the hour of rest;
While all the future, for thy purer soul,
With "sober certainties" of love is blest.

That sigh of thine, not meant for human ear,
Tells that these words thy humbleness offend;
Yet bear me up—else faltering in the rear
Of a steep march: support me to the end.

Peace settles where the intellect is meek,
And Love is dutiful in thought and deed;
Through Thee communion with that Love I seek:
The faith Heaven strengthens where *he* moulds the Creed.

Wordsworth's later years were shadowed by two great sorrows. The first was the collapse, physical and mental, of his sister Dorothy. Through all his early and middle life she had been his closest, most inseparable companion. There is no record of fraternal friendship more entirely devoted. In Racedown, Alfoxden, and the early years in Dove Cottage, as we have seen, she had not only made his home, but she had been at his side in all his walks, she had copied his poems, and never once doubted

his poetic mission and his certain future success. Without her, he might never have been a poet. Although she had received several offers of marriage—if De Quincey's gossiping narrative can be trusted—she seems never to have entertained a thought of any home save with her brother, nor of any interest that was not identified with his. But her high-strung nature at length began to break under this prolonged tension, and her physical strength was doubtless also weakened by the habit of long and fatiguing walks. Two or three lesser premonitory attacks of illness were followed in 1832 by an alarming disease of the brain. She rallied, but never fully recovered; and by 1836 she had sunk into a condition of hopeless weakness, both physical and mental. She outlived her brother, but for the nearly twenty-four years of life that remained to her, she was generally confined to her room, unable to walk or to read, sunk for most of the time in a mood of gentle, childish depression, that contrasted sadly with her old energy and fulness of life. Wordsworth felt most keenly the loss of her active companionship. He ministered to all her wants with patient solicitude, and in the last year and a half of his life

seemed to find in daily attendance upon her almost his only employment.

For some years after 1836, the place in Wordsworth's daily life that had been occupied by his sister Dorothy was in great measure filled by his daughter Dora. Dora Wordsworth was, in many respects, very like her Aunt Dorothy. She had the same quick sympathies, the same observant eye, the same buoyant and vivacious temper. After the condition of his sister became hopeless, Wordsworth found himself more and more dependent upon the cheerful companionship of Dora, and looked forward to her approaching marriage and departure from his household with a positive agony of apprehension. Mr. Quillinan, to whom she was betrothed, he had long regarded with esteem and friendship; but the thought of parting with the daughter who was the life and light of his house seemed intolerable; and it was only because he saw that his reluctance was really preying upon her health and spirits that he gave his assent. Dora was married in 1841, and shortly thereafter came to reside in Rydal near her father. But in the next two or three years her strength seemed declining, and in 1845 her husband

took her to Spain and Portugal in the hope that a more genial climate might restore her health. The hope was not fulfilled. They returned the following year; Mrs. Quillinan's condition grew steadily worse, and she died in the summer of 1847.

The death of his daughter was the last and crowning sorrow of Wordsworth's life. His steadfast nature, strengthened by a firm religious faith and schooled by long habit of quiet self-control did not easily give way to any outward signs of grief; but this blow, falling when he was beginning to feel the burden of seventy-seven years, was almost too much for endurance. "At his daughter's death," says Sir Henry Taylor, "a silence as of death fell upon him; and though during the interval between her death and his own, his genius was not at all times incapable of its old animation, I believe it never again broke into song." In point of fact, after the death of Dora Quillinan, he probably never wrote another line of poetry.* He was never prone to utter in verse his own personal joy or grief; and this last great sorrow sealed his lips. He regained

* The Ode for the Installation of Prince Albert as Chancellor of Cambridge University, which occurred in the same week with the death of Mrs. Quillinan, was certainly written in part, perhaps wholly, by Wordsworth's nephew, Christopher.

that high outward composure that he had maintained all his life, though now more chastened and solemn; but his work as a poet was done.

Any man whose days are prolonged to see his eightieth year is likely to know something of the loneliness of life. Especially will this be the case if, like Wordsworth, he passes his age in retirement, remote from the crowded ways of men. Wordsworth had lived to know his fame was secure, and to have the satisfaction that his poetry had endeared him to thousands who would never see his face. But the friends of his youth were now all gone. Coleridge went in 1834, Lamb only a few weeks thereafter. Southey, his mind enfeebled by a long life of intense and tireless labor, died in 1843. There were none who could ever quite take the place of these men. One or two other friends who had for a time been his neighbors in the Lake Region were now gone. John Wilson, most hearty and breezy of companions, after the death of his wife in 1837, found his summer home at Elleray on Windermere too lonely and removed permanently to Edinburgh. Doctor Thomas Arnold who, despite their differences of opinion on political matters, warmly admired Wordsworth both as poet and as man, pur-

chased in 1835 the little estate of Fox How on the other side of Rydal Water, and for several summers was much in Wordsworth's company; but he died in 1842. Finally, the last tie that bound Wordsworth to the group of his early friends was broken by the death of Hartley Coleridge in January, 1849. Hartley Coleridge had certainly fulfilled in part the prediction of Wordsworth made so many years before in the lines *To H. C. Six Years Old:*

> Nature will either end thee quite;
> Or lengthening out thy season of delight,
> Preserve for thee, by individual right,
> A young lamb's heart among the full-grown flocks.

He had known enough of sorrow; but he had preserved the "young lamb's heart." For a dozen years he had lived in the little Nab Cottage beside Rydal, and no face was better known or more gladly welcomed at every fireside through all that region. To this day the traditions of the Lake Country which retain only a distant respect for the personality of Wordsworth as a grave man who "never said nowt to nobody," cherish warmly the memory of "little Hartley."

"Quite different," said one of his old neighbors, "Wudswuth was from l'le Hartley. Hartley al-

ways had a bit of smile or a twinkle in his faace, but Wudswuth was not lovable in the faace by noa means, for a' he was a sizeable man, mind ye."

Hartley Coleridge had inherited from his father a weakness of will that allowed him to lapse into occasional intemperance, especially in his university days, and that seemed to make a steadfast and persistent course of endeavor impossible. But his character had never been stained by any degrading vices, and he retained all his days a bright imagination and a certain gentle purity and kindness which endeared him to everybody, and which finds expression in his volume of verse. For years Wordsworth had regarded him with a more than paternal watchfulness and solicitude; and he in turn had felt for the whole family at Rydal Mount an almost reverent affection. During the last illness Wordsworth visited him daily, and it was Mrs. Wordsworth who summoned his relatives to his dying bed. When word was brought later in that day to Wordsworth that all was over, the old poet said, "Let him lie by us, he would have wished it," and the next morning with the sexton of the Grasmere church he measured in the churchyard the resting-places for himself and his wife, and then directed that Hartley

should be laid next them. "Keep the ground for us," he said to the sexton, "we are old people, and it can not be for long."

It was not to be for long. Only a little more than two years were left to Wordsworth; years of the high serenity that should fitly close such a life as his. There was no long period of wasting strength and declining mental power. He spent the summer of 1849 visiting friends in the South of England, and showed few indications of the burden of age save a certain heightened calm of manner and a growing dislike for much conversation. But he had no longer any impulse to poetry. His thought seemed rather turned inward and upward in that temper of still reflection which betokens

> The depth and not the tumult of the soul.

Caroline Fox wrote in her Journal for December of that year: "Aunt Charles, writing of a visit to the now patriarchal-looking poet at Rydal Mount, says, 'The gentle, softened evening light of his spirit is very lovely, and there is a quiet sublimity about him.'" The end came in the following spring. A chill taken during a walk on a raw March afternoon brought on a pleurisy from which it soon be-

came evident he could not recover. His thoughts in the intervals of consciousness during the last weeks seemed to be with his beloved daughter. Shortly before his death, as one of his nieces entered the room, he started as from sleep and asked with faint eagerness, "Is that Dora?" He died at noon on the twenty-third of April, 1850.

The pathetic twilight of Dorothy Wordsworth's life lingered nearly five years longer; Mrs. Wordsworth, totally blind for the last three years of her life, but always the same high-souled woman, with "reason firm and temperate will," survived until 1859, dying at the ripe age of eighty-nine years.

Few spots of earth can be more sacred than that corner of the little Grasmere churchyard where solemn mountains look down upon the grave of their poet, and day and night the quiet Rothay flowing by, sings forever a faint under-song of peace.

It is probably safe to say that no English poet's fame is more securely established than that of William Wordsworth. More than sixty years have now passed since his death, but there have been few indications of change or fluctuation in the verdict upon his work. Interest in his contemporaries,

Byron, Shelley, Keats, grows or declines with variations in the tone of social or moral feeling; but the number of Wordsworth's lovers seems likely to remain pretty constant from one generation to another, and the grounds of their love unchanged. Popular, indeed, Wordsworth can never be. His poetry has few of those qualities that appeal to the hasty and unreflecting readers, who are always to be in the majority. Careful, even finical in his endeavor to secure precision and propriety of phrase, he had little sense of the music of verse, and no gift of that spontaneous song which rings all the more bravely or sweetly in the popular ear that it has but meager content of thought. His lines may repeat themselves in our seasons of quiet meditation: but the laborer will not sing them at his work, nor the lover to his lady, nor the mother to her child. Moreover, he had little of the keen delight in mere outward beauty of sense which could put Keats in such a fine rapture, but which does not yield any definite moral meaning.

Nor did he have much sympathy with any of those impassioned forms of activity which seem to usurp the control of reason, or disturb the vision of truth. Passion there certainly is

in his verse; but it is the glow of a calm exaltation of spirit, the joy of elevated thought. His work must always lack breadth and warmth. He held himself aloof from the pursuits and strivings that make up the outward life of men, and his line never seems to pulsate with a full-veined humanity. Still less can he render the charm of imaginary character or action. He admits no element of fiction or illusion. He rarely enters the realm of romance or adventure, and when he does, it is evident that he is not at home there. Wordsworth's most unreadable poetry is not found in the homiletical commonplaces of *The Excursion* or the later sonnets, but in his occasional attempts at romantic ballad and tragedy, the *Burd Helen* or *The Borderers*. Even so loyal a Wordsworthian as Arnold confessed that he could not read the *Vaudracour* and *Julia*.

But it is just here that we may see the secret of Wordsworth's power. If he is impatient of the illusions of passion and romance that enliven or illumine the poet's page, it is because they often serve to conceal its emptiness or its falsity. Imagination to Wordsworth never means the power to invent the unreal, but rather the power to discover the

ideal. It was a deeper and clearer vision. The ideal is only the real more truly seen. Fancy might play with unreal shapes and attributes of things but only to show more clearly by contrast their essential nature which imagination reveals.

This is Wordsworth's claim to his high and lasting place. He has written not a line that is idle or insincere. Everywhere it is the quality of truth that gives highest value to his work. For example, in his nature poetry. It will now be generally admitted that Wordsworth is preeminently the poet of Nature. This not merely because so much of his poetry was inspired by the phenomena of the external world, certainly not because he had any unusual gift of description—for he had not; but because of his peculiar view of the meaning and influence of what we call nature. As that influence must be chiefly in the realm of feeling, it is not possible to express it adequately in words; but nobody will any longer deride the attempt to do so as merely subjective mysticism or empty raptures over stocks and stones. We have come to recognize that our deepest feeling in the presence of the outer world is something more than the mere sensuous delight in form and color. What we call beauty and sublimity in

nature make their truest appeal to our moral sensibilities; and they imperatively suggest behind all the changing phenomena of the world some Universal Moral Life. In this conviction philosophy and religion are agreed, and science will not dissent. Here, as elsewhere, Wordsworth has seen and spoken the deepest truth; and he was the first English poet to speak it. Different men may put different names upon this view of Nature; but every man who has well read his Wordsworth knows that the world has come to have for him a new and deeper meaning. Not merely because the vales of Grasmere and Rydal lie so fair in the embrace of their encircling hills do lovers of the poet resort thither as to a shrine; but rather because it was just this valley floor, these mist-wreathed hills, this slow moving river, that first spoke to the soul of William Wordsworth deeper truth than any other scene has ever spoken to any other poet.

There is the same truth in his poetry of humble and rustic life. He made little attempt to portray that life in its exterior circumstance. He was not striving to stir our pity for its narrowness and hardships. The moving accident was not his trade. His poetry is not intentionally pathetic. The subjects of

this verse are the essential virtues, the primal affections and convictions which lie at the basis of our human nature, and which—so he thought—can best be seen in the lives of plain and humble folk. Doubtless in his desire to exhibit these elementary virtues in their simplest form, without the disguises of convention, he sometimes—especially in his earlier years—needlessly exaggerated the homeliness or rusticity of his people. In his eagerness to show us truth he sometimes offended our sense of beauty. He forgot that we are not likely to perceive the underlying virtues in a character that must inevitably seem to us puerile, or helpless, or rude. Yet in poems most liable to this criticism, such as *The Idiot Boy* or *Simon Lee* or *Peter Bell,* the truths of human nature which form the motive and core of the poem are always justly perceived and estimated. These poems are not sentimental or affected; they are essentially true. And even the humblest of them are not depressing or pessimistic in tone. Wordsworth sees rather the instinctive affections, the quiet strength of endurance, the blind but undefeated hope, which are the deepest motives of our nature, and can sustain life under even the hardest conditions. While in the nobler poems of the class, like

The Brothers or *Michael,* the central virtues of character stand out lofty and lone, with not a single word of rhetoric to enhance or embellish them, like bare and solemn mountain peaks. To read such poetry is to find new reasons for thinking nobly of human nature in whatever lowly circumstances.

But Wordsworth was not merely a poet; he was a seer. The mind of Man, as seen in his own mind was, as he says,

> My haunt, and the main region of my song.

His profoundest verse is the veracious record of what he saw there. All his work, indeed, in a degree true of no other poet, is subjective, born not of action or passion, but of reflection. His nature poetry is always the interpretation of sensuous impressions in terms of moral feeling; and his poems of humble life are concerned not so much with some character or incident as with the truth or impulse that character or incident had left in his own mind. But his most characteristic mood is one of pure introspection. Without any external suggestion or impulse he turns his eyes directly inward upon his own mind, to ask those questions which must find their answer there or nowhere. Whence came this desire for

order and reason that forces us to ask such questions? What is the warrant and authority of that feeling we call duty? What are we to think of those intimations that rise into consciousness we know not how or whence, those sudden glimpses of larger truth than we can comprehend, the

> obstinate questionings
> Of sense and outward things?

How far may we credit that blessed mood when

> laid asleep
> In body and become a living soul
> We see into the life of things?

Shall we trust our affections or our reason? And what is the meaning of this we call Life?

Now it is the mission of the seer to ask such questions, not to answer them. It is the high praise of Wordsworth that he was the first of English poets to ask them. For a century before him our poetry was philosophical and didactic, but shallow and formal. There are no deep places in the eighteenth century soul. Its questions and answers are authorized by the catechism of the churchman, or set aside by the easy philosophy of the deist. Its truths are conventional, its emotions second-hand. But

Wordsworth explored his soul for himself, and recorded with absolute sincerity what he found there. Here as everywhere the value of his work consists solely in its truth; he had no gift, like Shelley, to clothe a false or dubious teaching in surpassingly beautiful imagery. He had, indeed, no system of philosophy into which he could fit all the facts of life. There is no such system. It is precisely the greatness of man that he must always ask questions which he can not answer, that his vision will always transcend his knowledge. But Wordsworth found no essential contradictions among his indubitable beliefs, no conflicts among his imperative impulses. All his thinking issued in a sane and settled optimism. He found no evidence to

> disturb his cheerful faith
> That all which we behold is full of blessings,

or to lessen his confidence in the rule of order and benevolence beyond the limits of our knowledge.

His critics have urged that though Wordsworth's reflective poetry when at its best may deserve high praise, when at its worst it sinks now into bad commonplace and now into utter obscurity. And it is quite true that when he descends from high con-

templation to lecture us upon matters of prudence or practise, upon education, or the poor-laws, or the reform bill, as he was frequently inclined to do in his later years, he can be quite as dull and prosaic as any sensible Tory of the early Victorian period. But when he turns from a consideration of those laws which parliaments may make to the laws which God has made, he may be obscure, but he is never quite commonplace. His language may be severely plain and bald—he was always fearful of the disguises of rhetoric; but his thought is not shallow or trite. As for his occasional obscurity, that perhaps was inevitable when he attempted to put into speech those intimations and conjectures, those divine half-seen truths that will not be shaped into clear form. Wordsworth had no desire or liking for mysticism. He was impatient of whatever is vague or ambiguous in speech. Even when skirting the verge of possible knowledge he is intent on calm ordered statement before the intellect. But in that effort, as he himself says,

> The intellectual power, through words and things
> Goes sounding on, a dim and perilous way

often without reaching clear utterance. Language

at best is able merely to suggest the deepest or subtlest experience; and Wordsworth, not content with mere suggestion, sometimes passed into positive obscurity in the very endeavor to be plain. But let us make all reasonable concessions to his critics. There will still be few to dispute the claim that of all English poets no one has embodied in his work more profound spiritual truths, or opened to faith a calmer and loftier outlook.

He was not a genial man. He lived in the quietude of thought. His poetry will never speak to the busy crowd. But it can render us better service than that. It can take us out of all passionate striving, away from the dreary intercourse of life, and set us in the solitude of nature as in a sanctuary filled with "the breathing balm, the silence and the calm of mute insensate things"; it can infuse a healthy sympathy for the essential virtues of men, however homely; and it can dilate the soul with thoughts as lofty and as pure as the naked open sky.

THE END

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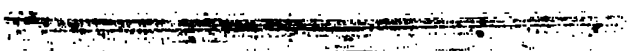

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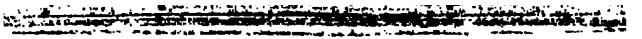

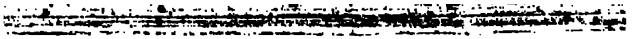
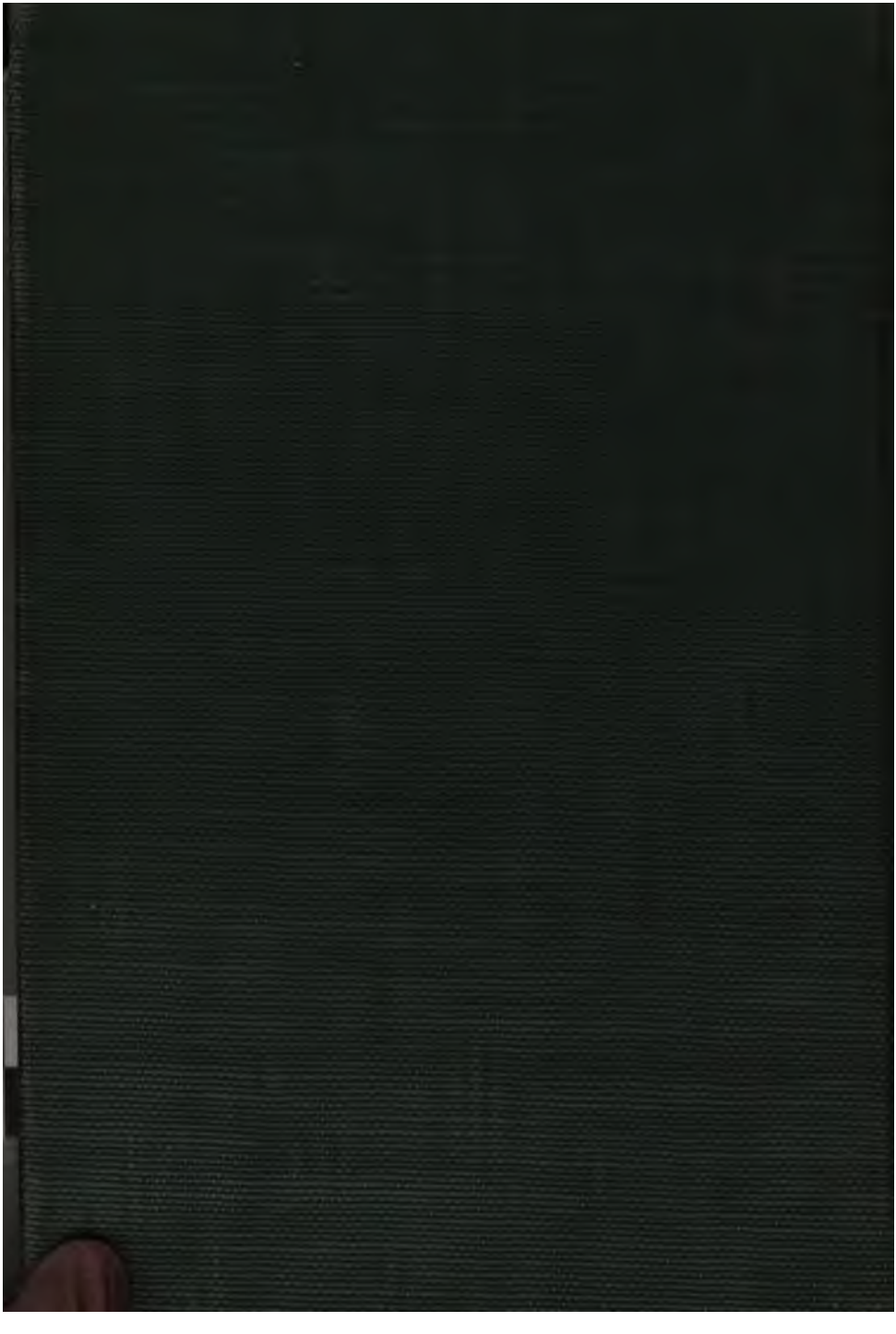
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